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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. "The GM's weirdly lucky today. I bet he could get the character he wanted from just one 10x pull."

0.75 : A minor storyline takes the place of the main plot.
E.g. "Um, because of all the GM's endless crits, I used up all my resources in the mid-campaign clash!"

1.0 : Some fatal mistake prevents the true ending from ever coming to fruition.
E.g. "I appreciate being given opportunities to heal every now and then, but it's really not enough..."

1.25 : The GM condemns his players but tries to figure out how to continue in their next session.
E.g. "Ugh, we'll lose all face if we turn tail here. I know the GM says we should retreat, but that'll definitely affect the story going onward..."

1.5 : The party intentionally wipes.
E.g. "Bring it on, Climax! Huh? A critical on the first hit?!"

1.75 : The players commit genocide or otherwise move to bring the setting to its knees. The GM silently shuts his screen.
E.g. "Nooo... The GM's luck is through the roof. Three crits in a row? That's not normal."

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. "Thanks to some really, really forced storytelling from the GM, we managed to avoid utter defeat. But whata nightmare; we nearly TPK'd I don't know how many times, and we still didn't finish the mission... No one can win against twelve critical hits in one session!"

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Preface

Tabletop Role-Playing 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.

The phrase "magus's disciple" carried a certain gravity to the untrained ear, but in practice, the role had more in common with that of a secretary than anything else.

"So many letters..."

The budding magus clenched her fists at the cuffs of her clothes, newly tailored after her growth spurt over the course of the summer, and a flyaway strand of her carefully tended hair gave away her displeasure and deep fatigue. The young student couldn't help her amber eyes from falling half closed at the sight of the heap of missives and the work that was to come. Even as her face continued to lose its baby fat, she felt a child's expression of anguish creep in from the edges of her face, in spite of every scolding she'd received so far. Her training at the College had drilled into her time and again the importance of the power to maintain a cryptic smile or icy, vacant affect at all working hours, but she still recoiled at the

injustice of every harsh rebuke for daring to let slip a momentary frown at the first sight of the morning's workload.

Now thirteen years of age and dressed in a gorgeous robe befitting her status, Elisa let out an exhausted sigh at the shape that von Ubiorum's combined professorial and comital duties had taken.

The southern branch of the College, called the Krahenschanze, housed an underground structure containing personal laboratories available to those who had reached the position of researcher. There were three methods by which letters could be delivered to these members.

The first method employed pneumatic tubes, utilized by the College to send all its official documentation, and bore the highest level of prestige and formality. Accepting letters via this method was mandatory, which made it a surefire measure to get your recipient to read what you sent. Despite this, sending mail via the tubes required a number of procedures—enough to turn the method into a chore—which meant that it wasn't used overly frequently.

The second method was to take your letters to the clerical staff of the College, who would then deliver the letters into the personal mailboxes stationed in front of each laboratory.

The final method was to personally use a familiar or a paper messenger to surpass the recipient's protective barriers. However, this direct method was only for those closest to the recipient. Magia dared to toss aside their humanity in order to peer into the abyss of arcane knowledge. Their laboratories were the bastions of their insight, and there were few fools who would wish to open a seam in the safeguards enfolding the secrets within.

Naturally, most letters were delivered by the second of these methods, to the eternal chagrin of many a magus's apprentice. It would be fine if your charge for the most part abstained from the salons and tea parties of the social scene and had no interest in advertising themselves to any meaningful degree. Indeed, there were some faculty members who waited in front of their letterbox in earnest hope that at least *one* letter would arrive soon. However, in this particular apprentice's case, nothing could be further than the truth; her professor was the picture of popularity.

When a professor was busy with their research, lectures, and official business, it was impossible for them to look over the dozen or, in the worst-case scenario, a hundred-odd letters that would pile up over the course of a day or two, nor could they be expected to keep such an effort up over the course of their daily life. Such affairs had to be outsourced to an ever-available, flexible, capable dogsbody—the apprentice. Their own precious time was spent sieving the letters to deem which were worthy of their master's eyes. Such a task would be fine if Elisa had other apprentices to work with—indeed, someone of Agrippina's standing was supposed to have two or three—but instead she was forced to contend alone, and at great personal cost.

"I can't believe this... I wish the people at the office would at least sort them for me..."

Elisa pushed down her self-pitying emotions and began carefully collecting the messy stack. The letters were enough to fill the young girl's arms—it would take an incredible amount of time to simply read the name of each sender and verify if they were on the "blocked senders" list. If this weren't a labor unto itself, should there be a new name among the letters, then she would have to cross-reference them with the noble register and double-check that they didn't have any sort of connection to one of Agrippina's blacklisted names, and as such were to be ignored and burned upon arrival. She also had to deal with other fringe cases—if the College had sent the schedule for a lecture, then Elisa was tasked with checking it against Agrippina's own agenda.

For Elisa, who was busy with lectures, homework, and also with Lady Leizniz's dress-up events—so frequent that the apprentice wondered if the wraith thought she had all the time in the world—this whole letter sorting business was nothing short of agony.

This week's load was particularly badly timed—she had three pieces of coursework which were all due essentially at once. The professors ignored the students' complaints, continuing the cycle with the excuse that they'd had it tough too in their day, and as such wouldn't change any schedule even at the expense of their lives. As such, there was never any discussion between professors regarding

deadlines or the constant pain of the student body—especially for those who hadn't chosen their specialty, who were functionally expected to excel in everything they were taking at once.

"Black... Black... Black again... Green... This one's from...von Russelheim? Who's that?" Elisa said to herself as she sorted each letter.

There were four boxes for the letters: black, green, yellow, and red. The black box was for letters for immediate disposal, ones from idiots or enemies and not even worth reading. The green box was for seemingly harmless new senders or for good-natured acquaintances, whose letters were worth reading when time was available. The yellow box was for letters that should be read before the day was over. Finally, the red box was for letters that Elisa was obliged to inform Agrippina about immediately.

Elisa leafed through the well-thumbed book of noble connections and stopped on the page with von Russelheim's information on it.

"Let's see... Aha, Lady Leizniz's former apprentice! Yellow, then."

After verifying his connection—a "sibling disciple" of her own master—Elisa placed the letter in its relevant box.

It was times like these where she wished she had more information to go on than simply the sender's name. It would be less time-consuming and far easier if she could see what the letters said, but the envelopes were sealed with dangerous formulae to keep curious eyes out. Thinking about how the only "safe" letters to hold were notices or circulars from the College brought tears to her eyes.

As she plugged away at this tiresome work, the bell outside chimed, letting her know that she'd already burned through half an hour on it all.

Elisa flung the letter in her hands aside and rubbed at the corners of her eyes. In two days her coursework on the basics of magical manipulation of the physical plane came due; the day after that she had a test on the general effects of mana waves from celestial bodies; all the while the deadline for her paper for her Variable Catalyst Uses I class was looming.

Recently, her master had told Elisa that she reacted in the same way as her brother did when exhausted. Although she secretly felt

happy at the comparison, it was little solace from the unrelenting demands of her daily duties. There simply wasn't enough time. How could there still be so many tasks to get through when Agrippina's steward was handling the bulk of the courtly duties? She wanted to let the tears come and call out for her big brother.

"Should I work out a spell that can sort these automatically?" Elisa muttered to herself. "But it might interfere with the privacy formulae and cause an explosion. That wouldn't be fun at all. The School of Daybreak do this without even batting an eye..."

How on earth had her big brother Erich managed to shoulder the task of dealing with Agrippina's letters, as she entered her social circles with aplomb, without a steward or a single retainer to help? With no concern to how she might have looked, Elisa placed her chin upon the desk and let her body slump down as these thoughts went around her head.

It pained Elisa to say this about her brother, but in her opinion Erich had been *too* helpful to Agrippina. He understood spells instinctually, dealt with dangerous matters with ease, and even with all of her practice, she felt that his palatial speech was still leagues better than hers. On top of that, with his joint usage of his Unseen Hands and Farsight, he could burn through his inbox eight times as fast. Elisa could use the same spells, but she felt neither the desire nor the possibility that she could emulate her brother's technique.

It was Elisa's own personal tragedy that the more she understood of the arcane, the less she felt that her brother was a regular old mensch. She could only make a supposition, but she felt that Erich had not so much a train of thought as an entire department of transportation. Of course her brother had one ego and one soul, but what he did seemed utterly unthinkable without perfecting this incredible mental multitasking. Usually, such talents were seen only in methuselah. It was almost unbelievable that Erich could do what he did without imploding his brain. Most magia practiced to be able to maintain a few spells indefinitely, but it was an incredibly difficult feat on its own, and doubly so when handling a more mundane mental task.

"Hold on... Master doesn't think that I can do this just because

Erich can, does she?"

Of course I damned well can't! Elisa inwardly said in a tone reserved for outside the College, berating her brother who was miles away right now. It was a story as old as the Age of Gods: When there were talented siblings, each had to contend with comparison with the other.

"All right, game time. If I don't get this done in the next half hour, I won't be able to prepare for my practical."

Elisa brought an end to her sad, tealess break and was about to get back to her stack of letters when the clear chime of a bell sounded.

"Another letter?"

The bell indicated the arrival of a letter to Agrippina's study via the most private and personal method—a messenger spell. This direct method was often implemented by busy masters who had to fly around the capital on social business so that they could easily hand down disciplinary tasks to their disciples. Elisa often heard this sound before receiving private letters from Lady Leizniz, usually containing a huge list of books that she should "skim."

"I just want to ignore it...but I'm scared to think about the lecture master would give me if I did..."

Elisa dragged herself up and toward the mailbox. She unlocked it and what she saw sent her bad mood flying away in an instant.

Inside wasn't a bird or butterfly made of paper, but one simple-looking envelope.

It was a letter from Erich. These only came once or twice a season, out of his desire to not get in the way of her studies and life in the capital. Agrippina had installed a marker for space-bending magic so that Erich could directly deliver letters to his former charge or his beloved little sister.

"Oh, Dear Brother!" Elisa said. She cast aside any and all of the decorum that had been hammered into her muscle memory as she clutched the letter in her hands. She put aside her work for now and swiftly unsealed the letter.



The privacy formula, implemented with know-how begged from a Daybreak scholar, snapped open and revealed a thick stack within. However, this was no surprise to Elisa. The envelope didn't merely contain letters to Erich's dearest sister. In a script that was in line with Erich's delicate appearance—and quite unlike his choice of profession—was a number of letters for his friends in the capital, to whom Elisa was tasked with the delivery. It was Elisa's own point of pride that her own letter always took up the most paper. It was an indicator that he cared most about her among everyone he had left behind.

"Thank goodness... Looks like you're doing well, Dear Brother," Elisa said.

Erich's easy and well-penned palatial script told Elisa that her brother was whole and healthy. The fact that he hadn't got someone else to transcribe it in his stead and the fact that it wasn't written in a shaking hand told her that he wasn't injured, or at least that any injuries he had sustained had healed by the time he'd drafted the letter.

However, as the self-proclaimed most well-versed student of her big brother's habits, Elisa had no doubt that he was playing down certain elements of his latest "little adventure," as he'd put it. She was sure that he had saved a canton—no, judging from the heroic stories that had reached Berylin, maybe he had even saved a *city* by now.

Erich had always been the kind of boy who saw things through to the end, even if he had begun them merely on a whim. The example that came most readily to her mind was the tale of the huge pearl that Erich had won for her—that most precious of possessions that Elisa still hadn't decided what to do with. When Erich had seen Elisa's eyes all aglitter, he decided he would buy it for her and subsequently took on the challenge to win the money in a helmet-splitting challenge. In the end, Erich had ended up caught in an affair that had shaken the entire canton, spawning stories to be shared forevermore by the local gossips.

"I want to join you as soon as I can, Dear Brother," Elisa murmured to herself as she cradled this precious letter. However, the

road before her was still long. She had finally undertaken her arcane studies in earnest since turning thirteen, and the upcoming practical exam was merely one leg of the journey.

Magic was a world of effort *and* talent. More than seniority, a magician's future was shaped by the time you invested in perpetual study and your prudence in choosing said investments. Immortal students who were still stuck on the basics even after a decade of education were no less unheard of than disciples from the shorter-lived races who doggedly took on the professorial examinations in a mere half year as they aimed to reach the heights of a magus.

Elisa, stuck in her mensch shell with its limited lifespan, had been at her studies for a while, and it was time for her to decide how to specialize—in Erich's old world, it would have been odd to see a child still in the middle of their compulsory education making such decisions. This wasn't something that Elisa had started thinking of by her own volition; rather, the voices around her had started chattering that she should hurry up and pick. The magia, ever a technocratic bunch, gave great weight to a would-be peer's ability to curate a reputation.

Even Agrippina—who outwardly played down her gifts as merely the product of tireless diligence despite being a work-shy Renaissance woman coasting entirely on incredible natural talent behind closed doors—made public her specialty in the profoundly daunting field of space manipulation and held lectures on the same subject.

Elisa was not so enchanted with space or time.

It wasn't clear whether this disinterest came from some ordinary quirk of Elisa's or her alfish core, or perhaps even from the fact that she understood that past and present were a wavering and fluctuating space even if you weren't cognizant of it, but she couldn't muster the faintest shred of enthusiasm for the subject. Were she to begin to peer into that abyss and lock eyes with the ineffable chaos at the root of all things, she would jeopardize her humanity—worse, she might lose her *desire to be human at all*.

The master-student relationship at the College was rather unique in that there was no fixed rule that said the student must follow in

their master's footsteps and take on their field of research. It went without saying that specializing in something nominally alike made it easier for the master to teach their pupil, but at its core, all magic was merely the method by which the caster's mana bent or upturned the natural laws of the world in service to their private idiosyncracies, and as such there could be no real continuity from teacher to student in terms of theory or praxis. The craft of mana manipulation held the whole field of study together, but the same could be said of knife work in the art of cooking. Any two kitchens, suitably outfitted, were largely interchangeable regardless of what cultural palate they meant to serve; the chef's basic competence with the tools in front of them, their taste, and their approach defined all that came out of either one. The magus in their laboratory was scarcely any different.

Essentially, even when on good terms, a student's focus could stray far from that of their master.

An example close to Elisa was Mika. Although the School of First Light student was seemingly on good terms with their master, the two of them worked in markedly different realms. Whereas Mika specialized in oikodomurgy, their master had built his reputation on the making of homunculi. Both practices relied on the same fundamentals in the manipulation of matter and structure, but differed wildly in execution. Despite this, they worked well together.

Elisa assumed she was free to pick whatever she liked, and so she'd succumbed to the terribly human error of choice paralysis.

An average person would usually choose their path forward in their studies by weeding out what they were *bad* at, but for the young changeling, there was simply nothing she didn't excel at. She could conjure up magic in this plane as easily as breathing, her fondness for mixing her own perfumes set her up for A-pluses in concoction, and she'd proven a talented ornithurge. She'd long since gotten over her bad habit of unwittingly floating away. Now she could do it on command and, if she put enough thought into it, could even slip through solid objects. As long as she could put it into words, almost everything was on the table for her.

At the end of her tether, she had asked her master. The response

Elisa got in return was: "Your specialty is just a label. Choose whatever you like." This might have been *true,* but it wasn't remotely *helpful*.

Elisa's master's master wouldn't be much help either.

Lady Leizniz had been so gifted that those around her had wondered if she would be the youngest mortal student to reach professorship. It was unlikely that she was genuinely incompetent at anything. The woman seemed to take up her projects with all the fuss of getting up to pour a fresh cup of tea, regardless of the scale of the undertaking. Despite her specialty in psychosorcery, a recent essay she had published contained an utterly bewildering amalgamation of physics and magic in its discussion of the dispersal of mana waves at low temperatures. Granted, being a wraith, Lady Leizniz was used to low temperatures, and as such was perhaps privy to certain insights into the workings of thermodynamics that the living were not.

In any case, expecting Elisa to try and copy someone like that was a mind-boggling act of overreach.

Elisa feared that she *would* find out what it was she actually wanted to do later on, and that it would be altogether irreconcilable with whatever she chose to specialize in.

Agrippina wasn't a useful example to follow. If Elisa tried to emulate someone who could juggle her stock of ideas for papers in one hand with the demands of her job in the other, then her brain would turn to jelly before long.

The expectations of the public were heavy, even if you worked hard at your field of study. The College was the sort of place where having one's wandering eye noticed invited all manner of saccharine barbs. In such a place, multidisciplinarity invited nothing but trouble.

The monster that appeared in her imagination let out a plume of smoke and said: "Why not just do it all at once?" However, almost every student across the land would shake their fist and say that there wouldn't be a damn problem if that were possible! Elisa had neither the confidence nor the arrogance to believe that she could pull off such a feat.

Ultimately, she couldn't afford to waste time like her fellow

College students.

Elisa's fortunate situation made it easy to forget that she had lost her status as an Imperial citizen. In other words, she had no rights.

It was thanks to the protection of du Stahl-turned-von Ubiorum that people treated her as if she were nominally human, but the fact was that if she didn't reach professorship, her rights as a proper Imperial subject would never be restored to her. Even if she became a magus, if she forever remained as a mere researcher, she would never be permitted equal footing. Such was the fate of a changeling.

The long and the short of Elisa's situation was that as soon as she was viewed as a futureless failure, no one would bat an eyelid at whatever horrible treatment she would be subject to.

Still, this wasn't something that Elisa was too concerned with.

A monster though Agrippina might have been, she kept her promises. Agrippina had sworn that she would make Elisa a magus, and so, by hook or by crook, she would achieve that end even if the whole effort was akin to pushing a cart with four square wheels.

Agrippina would resort to any means at her disposal. If the matter came down to it, she was no specialist in psychosorcery, but she knew the discipline well enough to mold Elisa's mind into a shape more receptive to the challenges before her. She wouldn't even hesitate to swoop in and take her brother hostage while he was off chasing his dreams in a distant part of the Empire.

Elisa, naturally, had no interest in seeing Agrippina resort to such methods, and so she would fulfill her goal by her own means, as soon as she could. There was one reason above all that propelled her onward: She wanted to go outside.

Of course, she could leave the College grounds, but she had to receive permission from Agrippina or have someone to escort her. Going home to her family or even seeing her beloved brother were out of the question. It was no surprise how hard Elisa was working just to have her rights returned to her.

This meant that although Elisa didn't much care about what she'd specialize in, it was a decision that she couldn't afford to take lightly.

Among these ongoing worries about her studies, a new problem had emerged.

"What do I do with this...?"

Amid the stack was a letter addressed to Mika.

Mika was one of the few older students that Elisa could talk to without much worry, but she couldn't really deliver a letter to someone who wasn't there.

"This is why I told Mika so many times to forget the surprise," Elisa grumbled as she carefully put the letters back into the envelope and slipped the packet into her breast pocket to try and keep a hold of the warmth of her brother's love.

With this letter close to her, the memories of her previous life came back. The odor of the aging timber. The pleasant fragrance of dried flower wreaths. The mouthwatering smell of wurst crackling and bubbling amid joyous celebrations. The scent of a perfectly smoked wurst cooked just for her. The wonderful aroma of her mother's potage, the finest meal in Creation by Elisa's reckoning. And the last scent, a mix of soap and her brother's musk she'd caught from him as she hugged him before he left.

"Wait for me, Dear Brother," Elisa said to herself as she returned to her drudgery, her brother's letter rekindling her inner flame.

She would claw back everything that she loved. The road forward had to begin *somewhere*.

[Tips] Magia find beauty in disguising the extent of their hard work, but hiding one's talents makes the government's job of determining who is obliged to do what work infinitely more difficult. The natural result is that most students show off their area of expertise through their chosen specialty.

It pays to keep in mind that the world is large enough to contain more than a few prodigies whose talents are so broad and vast that their original calling can get lost amid the churn.

"His flowing hair was like the sweetest nectar... Her eyes were like two pieces of amber... Verily, they bore up under the challenge..."

The bard sang with the beautiful accompaniment of a lap harp—a

fascinating rectangular instrument with numerous strings running across it whose tone could be altered by pushing down on keys and which was, as the name implied, held on the lap. The melody was in triple time and a minor key—a sentimental, amorous register and a perfect fit for the bard's deep bass. It was an interesting piece; now and again a passage drew those deep tones up into a higher tenor, leaving a deep impression on the listeners.

Unfortunately, the bard hadn't yet managed to work out how to build a setlist that matched his own capabilities and the tastes of the audience. He had chosen a love song and performed it with the typical mistakes of a second-rate bard.

This song had been growing in popularity across the region—a ballad of one woman's infinite patience in awaiting her lover's return and the day that her forlorn hope was joyously fulfilled. The melodious transition into the final, more upbeat act of the piece was so splendid that it seemed like the God of Music had descended from the heavens. But if the performer lacked the talent to stick the landing, the emotion came out half-baked, even for an audience primed to receive the subject matter thanks to the recent surge in popularity its characters had come to enjoy.

The heart-stirring piece today had been chosen in response to the larger number of women in the audience, but the upturned hat at the bard's feet spoke to the quality of his performance. In truth, it was admirable that he'd pulled in more coins than audience members, but the scattered applause painted quite the pitiful scene. The off-shift guards and dawdling menials who had come to listen hadn't particularly enjoyed what their break had won them.

However, there was one person who applauded heartily, despite the lightness of his purse. The bard's most ardent listener was a male ogre—his race obvious to the bard thanks to his blue skin—whose hearty claps reverberated through the air. He had a slightly regretful look on his face as he placed a single assarius into the hat, but the bard was satisfied well enough with his genuine response.

The ogre's steel-colored hair was common among the ogre tribes of the south, but less so among the tribes of the east and west—in other words, it was rare among those who fell under the Empire's

jurisdiction. It seemed like the ogre had come from a once-flourishing land that had been reduced to a vassal state in order to make a name for himself. However, it seemed like he hadn't yet developed an ear for Imperial stylings.

The ogre's face was more akin to a weathered boulder. Not only that, his wide eyes, glittering gold in the light of the bonfire, were at least two heads above everyone else. In short, he stood out among the audience and did *not* seem the type to enjoy a tale that was written to pull on the heartstrings.

Another oddity about the ogre was how he had joined a caravan and was traveling alone—male ogres almost never worked outside of their tribe. Fortunately the merchants had no qualms about letting him work for food and board. He was huge, measuring over two meters tall, and was far more capable at manual labor than your average mensch. With someone so useful, the merchants couldn't be bothered to care about his personal circumstances.

Something else that caused the ogre to stand out was his full set of armor. A closer look revealed that it seemed like it had been forcibly reworked to fit his gargantuan frame from a set made for *mensch*.

At any rate, the poet didn't care as long as his audience was happy. This ogre had listened with rapt attention to *Goldilocks: Crusher of the Corrupt* yesterday. Any oddities about his situation or appearance were overtaken by the precious joy at having such a keen audience member day in and day out.

"Oh? Did I miss it?"

A strikingly handsome young man approached from behind as the bard gathered up the obligatory pittance of copper coins tossed his way by his fellows.

"Hey, Professor. Yeah, it just finished," the ogre replied.

The man he had called "professor" had a tall and slender frame, not unlike a healthy cedar. He was muscular, but not overly so, and this contributed to his faintly masculine beauty. He had a slender neck and sweetly handsome features. A flame of ambition burned in his confident amber eyes. Although he was dashing enough to fit the role of a stage actor, his simple traveling robe and staff, taller than

even he was, indicated that he was, in fact, a mage.

"That's unfortunate. A pity I never seem to show up quite on time."

Like the ogre, he had joined the caravan in their journey westward. The mage, with his cedar staff adorned with a silver hawk, had been warmly welcomed by the caravan. They were sad that he would be leaving their troupe come Ende Erde, only midway along their route.

Like his compatriot, he enjoyed listening to the poet's songs and was known to come and listen when time permitted. Today he had been doing some repair work on the axle of a carriage at the caravan head's behest. Due to this extra bit of work, he hadn't been in time to listen to the *Love Song of the Huntress*.

"My esteemed mage, would you like me to perform it once more?"

The poet had remembered the day when this handsome mage had given him an equally handsome silver piece after his first performance of a song about Goldilocks Erich; he was more than happy to offer an encore. However, as the mage sat down before the campfire, he shook his head.

"That's okay. I don't want to bore everyone else just for my sake. Another would be just fine."

The mage pulled a quarter-piece from his pocket and handed it to the poet. It wasn't quite as generous as before, but the poet gladly took it and strummed his lap harp. He began to play a beloved old song that many in the Empire knew.

"Are you sure, Professor?"

"Yeah, of course."

The ogre sat himself next to the mage. The two both had the same destination. While the mage had his own reasons for heading to Marsheim, the ogre had fallen in love with the stories of Goldilocks Erich and had decided he would visit the place for himself.

"We're going straight to the source," the mage went on. "I'll be able to hear as many stories as I like. His skills are... Well, that's something to look forward to. Stories have a way of evolving when they're turned into songs."

"Huh, okay, gotcha. Well, I thought it was a good song."

The mage chuckled. Although the ogre looked very much the mage's senior, nothing could have been further from the truth.

The ogre's comment reminded the mage of something he had heard once. Ogre tribes had their own war songs, but they weren't "sung" in the same sense as the poet's work. Dancing and raucous shouting were far more common. These more delicate performances must have been rather novel for the ogre, especially considering the state of his home, the ogre paradise upon the Southern Sea. With semi-vassal status, the small city-states of the region scuffled to their heart's content, uninterrupted.

"I'd like to take you to a top-level poet's performance one day. At a fancy theater."

"That'd be a waste on me."

"Aha, hold on," he said, putting up a finger as a thought chanced upon him. "There's a *better* seat for you. A proper VIP seat."

The ogre didn't know what he meant by "VIP," but he felt his heart skip a beat at seeing his traveling companion's effete, enchanting gesture. Such was the allure even in the mage's smallest of movements.

"I mean, you're heading to Marsheim to join Goldilocks's Fellowship of the Blade, isn't that right?" the mage said, glancing at him.

The ogre gave a happy nod.

Goldilocks Erich was sung about in the Empire's western reaches, and many were growing to learn of the clan that he led. The story went that Siegfried the Lucky had been enraptured by Erich's feats and had asked him to teach him. Thanks to Erich's upright and generous personality, others had been drawn in and asked to be taught the way of the blade too as the clan became official not long after.

Back home in his own tribe, this ogre was everyone else's drudge. During battle, he was a support soldier—tasked with carrying essentials like spears and ammunition. He had developed a burly frame and decided to leave his home and head westward for greater things: to join the Fellowship of the Blade.

Among the many tales that had reached his ears, the ogre had heard in song that a valiant ogre named Laurentius praised the young swordsman as a "godly warrior." Perhaps the ogre had felt some small glimmer of hope for himself at hearing such praise for this mere mensch, and perhaps that alone had brought him to decide he would go to Marsheim.

Perhaps there, where heroes gathered, there would be more tales and songs too. If he worked near enough to Goldilocks, then he would never lack for more stories.

"However," the young mage said, as he pulled out a cigarette, half listening to the song of an adventurer unremarkable enough that their name need not be penned here. As the white smoke enveloped him, the ogre wondered if the concoction of fragrant and medicinal herbs in the cigarette was a bespoke mix. "It's fine to be moved by what you hear in the stories, but don't get too lost in them. Dreams and reality are different beasts."

"Uhh..." the ogre replied. He could only tilt his head at his fellow traveler's pontificating manner. How were his dream of learning the ways of the blade under a hero he admired and reality meant to be connected?

"Dreams lead us to false impressions. If you let your sense of wonder unmoor you, mere fancies may turn into convictions while you aren't looking, and you'll lose your way as easy as breathing. I advise you to trust only what your eyes and ears tell you."

"Right..."

This advice, shared with a billow of fragrant smoke, didn't make much sense to a young man who couldn't even write his own name. The finer semantics of the mage's point got tangled up in the ogre's own dubious grasp of Rhinian. His grasp of his own tongue was finer, and he was no stranger to the challenges of polyglot life among the fractious wandering clans the Southern Sea, but here and now his abilities were, at best, limited to the realms of the merely conversational and informal.

"Hmm," the mage said, twigging to the ogre's struggle to parse his meaning. "Well, when you've got time come see me, I'll see if I can't help you brush up on your Rhinian, if you won't mind teaching

me a little of your own tongue."

"Whoa, really?! Thank you, Professor! Thank you so much! I can't do much else, but ask me anything you like!"

"Of course. But can you stop with the 'professor' business? My degree is hardly terminal."

"But Professor, you *are* a professor! The head trader told me that you should call smart folk who can use magic 'professor.'"

The mage shook his head, his modesty showing. It made him feel embarrassed.

As if sensing their conversation had come to a natural break, the song too came to its end. It was getting late; people in the crowd stood up to head to sleep. The mage and ogre too rose to head to their tent, when the unique sound of metal striking earth filled the air. It was the telltale sound of hooves.

"Is...the song over?" a voice said amid a yawn. "I kinda wanted to have some nice booze and listen to at least one song."

Some worried that the scout of a bandit group had sneaked into their campsite, but the new arrival was only a zentaur mercenary. She had sourced a barrel of what looked like alcohol from gods-knew-where and was shaking her dappled, grayfurred head—in stark contrast to her tanned, honey-colored skin—as people headed off to sleep. She looked over at the poet with hopeful eyes, but he hurriedly put his lap harp away in its case, eager to be gone.

When the mercenary had first turned up, most had pegged her as a toothless braggart, but this misunderstanding was shot down as quickly as the mountain bird she had sniped from one hundred fifty paces away. Unfortunately, her perennially empty wallet soon overshadowed her talents. The poet knew that he couldn't hope for even a single assarius from her; there was no point performing for an audience that only wanted an excuse to drink if they weren't going to pay.

"Good job out there. Thanks for keeping watch," the mage said.

"I know that we zentaurs have good night vision, but you lot are working me like a packhorse! Tch... Three nights straight on guard duty can get tiring, you know?"

She dropped her shoulders and held her hands to the fire, but the

mage could only give an awkward laugh in return. The zentaur had joined the caravan in exchange for her strength—indeed, she was skilled enough to take on more professional assignments—but the fact that she'd ended up stealing bottles the caravan meant to sell had left her frequently tasked with extra night watch or hunting duties.

"Can I count on you again today, kid?" she said to the ogre.

"You got it, Sis!"

The zentaur finished exorcising the early spring chill from her hands, opened her pouch, and pulled out something that looked like a large spatula.

The ogre fell to one knee beside her, and the zentaur braced her left foreleg against it. Her horseshoe was filled with dirt and undergrowth from all the running about of the day.

"Ooh, yeah, that's the spot. Mensch are just too weak for this!"

The device was a zentaur grooming tool. However, due to the logistical struggles inherent to the zentaur physique, it was impossible to clean one's own shoes. To the last, they had to rely on others to do this grooming for them.

While everyone else in the troupe had pegged her as a somewhat well-traveled blowhard upon first meeting her, the ogre could immediately tell that she was a valiant warrior. Maybe it was due to her bearing a similar aura to the warrior women of his own clan, but he had looked up to her since the day they met. He gladly, readily bent the knee for her.

"Good job," the zentaur said when he was done. "I'll give you a drink as a reward."

"Thank ya kindly."

"You do realize that he'll get shouted at too if you give him your stolen alcohol, right?" the mage chimed in.

"I stole it, not him. He'll be totally fine! I'll go hunt some birds for dinner, get told off, and that'll be that. It's like he's getting paid in advance!"

The mage couldn't believe what he was hearing, but the zentaur placed her next leg upon the ogre's knee as if nothing were out of the ordinary.

“What did the poet play today then, Prof?” the zentaur asked the mage. “Tell me it was boring and I didn’t miss anything.”

“I only showed up halfway through too, you know. It was pretty standard fare; you know how he is.”

“Oh!” the ogre chimed in. “He played something good earlier, one about Goldilocks!”

“Him again!” the zentaur said, her laugh cutting the ogre off. “Yeah, Erich’s got balls. I’ve got a good eye for guys; it looks like I wasn’t wrong. But it’s weird that the poet’s not made a song about our travels. I’m gonna find him tomorrow and give him an earful.”

“It’s ’cause it sounds like you’re makin’ it up...” the ogre said, but the zentaur was unperturbed. Maybe her raucous laughter had drowned him out.

In truth, the mage almost couldn’t believe that he’d stumbled upon this one-eared zentaur merely by chance. How could a single caravan draw their fates together? It was said that the God of Cycles and the God of Trials drew people together and apart again simply on a whim, but it was truly a surprise to see their fates intertwined in the Empire’s lonely western reach.

The black-haired mage looked up, his head full of questions, but the Night Goddess’s divine form and the dark void enveloping Her offered up no answers.

[Tips] Caravans may allow talented people to join them in their travels, and in most cases they will not complain, so long as that talent continues to translate into a hard day’s work.

Late Spring of the Eighteenth Year (I)

Rejoining PCs

Bonds are a strange thing. Characters can drift apart and come back together depending on the flow of a session or simply on the schedules of the players. It is impossible to foretell when a happy reunion awaits.

Winter had seemed to arrest the very wheels of time, but now spring had come and unstuck them. One needed to look no further than the Empire of Rhine's farthest western reaches to see it laid out plain. Marsheim, the region's capital, bustled with travelers and visitors. North streamed the domestic caravans who'd overwintered in the city; west went those traders who sought fine curios past the Empire's borders. The streets were jammed with crowds sampled from all the kiths of Rhine and beyond.

"Wow... That's a lotta people..." the ogre muttered, completely taken by the scene before him. Even for the two seasons or so he'd spent wandering the Empire, he'd never set foot in such a metropolis, with all its thronging tens of thousands, and scarcely any such thing existed along the Southern Sea... He had come to Ende Erde with the intention of making a living on his martial might, but his journey had never really touched upon any of Rhine's urban centers. Wilder still, the city was flush with every merchant, exile, pilgrim, carnie, vagabond, fortune-seeker, and oddity the warming days could render from the margins of the world, and the resultant buzz of the city addled the young ogre's mind like a fine and foreign liquor.

"It's practically quiet compared to the capital," Mika said to his

companion. “Even some of the territorial capitals are bigger than Marsheim!”

“Seriously?! There’s two whole cities even bigger than this?!”

“Ha ha, not only two. Way more. There’s a city on one of the river ports—Elbeland; more than a million souls call it home, and that’s only counting legal citizens. Then Nord-Rhine, city of steel and stills—they have two million. Only about fifty thousand live within the walls, I’ll concede, but a city that spills and sprawls past its own bounds always impresses more than any neat and tidy fortress-city.”

As Mika had said, though Marsheim was undeniably huge, it was only a big fish in a small pond. Purely per capita, it didn’t even rank in the ten biggest cities in Rhine; it was only a midsized city by most reckonings. After all, Marsheim was the Empire’s beachhead against the nations of the west; it was meant to be *secure* and fit to project force more than it was meant to be populous.

“Not too many warriors about, compared to Londium,” Dietrich added.

“Ah yes, you’re from the northern isles,” Mika said to his zentaur companion. “How’s the capital doing?”

“Burned down twice before I was born, but seems like it’s doing all right at the moment. Seems like people wanna burn things down every time we get a new high king. I think everyone’s used to it by now.”

In spite of its martial role, Marsheim was practically a paradisaical oasis compared to its equivalents abroad—at least in the eyes of your average Rhinian. Londium, City of Bridges, might as well have been a nest of barbarians.

The zentaur’s actual point she had been steering at had been the lack of barracks erected around the city, of mercenary groups waiting on new clients, and of housecarls skulking about in search of a new liege. In terms of physical scale, Marsheim outstripped Londium.

“Man... You two are amazing... You’ve been everywhere,” the ogre said.

“Not at all. I’m simply traveling on a cozy government stipend!”

“I just kinda wandered about looking to rumble.”

While the ogre pondered what a "stipend" was, Mika led the group toward the line for city entry, staff in hand. However, he didn't join the line with the common rabble; instead, he made for the guardroom at the side of the gate.

Bringing Mika's belongings with him, the ogre asked the mage if they didn't need to line up, to which Mika pulled out a little slip of paper from his pocket. Bearing a wax seal, the paper was a noble-approved pass into the city. Why would the group need to waste time with long lines when they had the means to skip it altogether?

"A chance encounter in this life oft suggests a deeper bond in lives long ended—or so they say in the east. I feel bad for making you carry my things, but we can expedite your entry into the city by telling them you're my bodyguard. That way you won't have to pay for entry either. Great, right?"

"Huh? Is that why you gave me your belongings?"

"Did you just take them from me without thinking anything of it?"

"Well, I, uh..."

The ogre awkwardly scratched at his head, but that was the truth. After all, ogre menfolk's duty was to attend to all the petty tasks and daily household labors that were beneath a warrior's station. He had developed an instinct to play pack mule for anyone he respected.

"I'm not so haughty nor so cruel as to force someone to carry my things without even paying them," the mage said with a slight smile.

The ogre felt a flush of embarrassment at seeing this illustrious mage show such a sweet side, in spite of speaking as one man to another.

Ogres and mensch were not so different in physiognomy; it wasn't uncommon for ogres to see a certain charm in mensch in theory. In practice, there were certain daunting logistical hurdles an ogre-mensch relationship had to clear if both parties wished to plumb certain realms of intimacy, and so such temptations of the flesh tended to invite much hemming and hawing on the ogre's part.

"Hold on, Prof..." Dietrich said, leaning in. "What about me?"

"Sorry, but bringing two bodyguards along is a little above my station," Mika replied with a shrug, waving the letter in front of him.

Someone was always watching, judging, waiting for their moment. If a College student were to act like a government official and waltz into the city with two bodyguards in tow, who knew what rumors would fly behind his back. In Rhine, you were never short of examples of how success could prove a gateway to arrogance and self-destruction, and so it paid to keep receipts on every little display of excess pomp and swagger. You never knew who kept tabs on whom, nor how deep and ruinous their ledger of secrets might run, nor how far any bit of gossip might reach. Somewhere out there, a stranger might have known precisely how old you were when you'd stopped wetting the bed.

It would reflect poorly on Mika's education if he was slandered as a wannabe noble the moment he had stepped out of his master's purview. Although one's common sense and moral compass had little bearing on one's chances at the College, no one could hope to see their time as a student through without learning how to carry oneself properly.

"Ugh..." the zentaur said. "Thought I'd save a little cash by joining you. Oh well. I'll be good and wait. I might be able to pull a few strings..."

Dietrich waved goodbye as she walked off to the line with a disappointed expression. The ogre watched her go, feeling a little guilty himself, and looked at the mage, imploring with his eyes for Mika to do something, *anything*.

"I've got my reasons," Mika said. "I don't want to give up my place at the head of the line."

"The line? Into Marsheim, you mean?"

"Huh? Oh, yes that's right." Mika chuckled. "Right, let's go."

Mika showed the guard his pass, and the ogre followed him into the city, feeling slightly awkward. Finally within the walls, he was unable to hide his excitement and took in every detail with a child's sense of wonder: tall brick buildings, rows of streetlamps, paved roads. Although the streetlamps were fewer and the roads were less well maintained than what you would see in Berylin, everything was new and exciting to the ogre.

What set his heart racing, though, was the fact that he was surely

rubbing shoulders with *heroes* by now—stalwart adventurers sung of in the stories, here in the flesh somehow!

There was the werewolf adventurer, famous and infamous in equal measure, Jorn the Ravenous Wolf. Manfred the Tongue-Splitter, the zentaur mercenary with the sharpest spear in the land. Hubertus the Deranged, the dvergr who had caused a scene at countless sporting showdowns and could easily fell professional soldiers, yet had turned down knighthood. Saint Fidelio, the noble-hearted dragonslayer, eternal servant of the people.

And, of course, there was the newest adventurer in Marsheim. As poets fought to build their own careers upon his fame, he had come into many names—Bandit Slayer, the Grinner, the Charitable—but most knew this hero as Goldilocks Erich.

Here he was, breathing the same air as the man he admired most. Who could blame him, or any others who did the same, for being so moved? Young would-be adventurers came here rain or shine to chase after their heroes, all with dreams of what could yet be in their heads.

It didn't matter how painful the reality of the path that awaited them might be; this one moment was precious. It was something that you would only experience once—a sensation that would never return, no matter how much you would try to reflect again on it.

If Mika were a cruel master, he would snap at the ogre and tell him to stop wasting time gawking at every little thing, but he knew the magic of this moment, and so he slowed his pace to walk alongside this newcomer to the city with a smile on his face. The ogre's legs were far longer than Mika's, but his pace was slower than a toddler's.

"Oh no!"

The ogre had been led about to and fro by his whims for a solid thirty minutes—the host of pointless trinkets he had picked up was evidence of this—before he realized something important. Here he was, walking without a goal in mind while holding Mika's luggage, having failed entirely to so much as ask where he was headed!

"I-I'm so, so sorry, Professor!" he said, guilt in his chest.

"No worries at all. I had fun, and I'd been meaning to pass this

way.”

The ogre wondered what Mika was talking about. He followed Mika’s outstretched hand—another simple yet beautiful movement—and noticed a sign for what looked to be a tavern.

“Lessee... The Snow... Snow-why? Uh, Snowee...”

“The Snowy Silverwolf.”

Although the ogre’s spoken Rhinian was serviceable, he could barely read or write *any* language. He thanked Mika for reading it out for him, and a brief silence fell. A few seconds passed as he finally put two and two together. When he realized just what this place was, he let out a sudden shout that made passersby glance over in concern.

He had chanced upon his destination.

The mage had craftily goaded the ogre, naive country mouse that he was, closer and closer to their mutual objective with every stop. Mika had shot the occasional meaningful glance at key points of interest and even given the ogre little pokes with his staff to guide his meandering in the right general direction. He had known exactly where to go ever since he had received a map from the guard—for a small fee, of course.

The ogre’s intention was obvious to Mika. It didn’t take more than a sliver of human insight to put together that the ogre would want to visit the tavern where Erich’s clan was based. He might have been distracted by the sights of the city, but this wasn’t something he could have possibly left for *tomorrow*.

“You came here after hearing the stories of Goldilocks, correct?” Mika said. “It was clear as day to where you’d like to go first.”

“Wow... You’re incredible, Professor. It’s true that you gotta be smart to use magic!”

“I’ve told you before, all this flattery gilds the lily, friend! Now, shall we head in?”

“Huh, ‘we’? Are you coming in too?”

Mika ushered the ogre along with a push, brushing off the remark, inwardly smiling at the fact that the ogre hadn’t yet asked why *he* was heading to Marsheim.

The tavern was simple and well-kept. A neatly polished bar

counter stood at the back of the spacious room, behind which stood a tough-looking gentleman with a fuzzy black beard—the owner of the Snowy Silverwolf.

It was busy inside. In particular, most tables and barstools were occupied by youths, adventurers by the look of them, partaking of the social lubricants or discussing their next job. It was just as the songs had said. The Snowy Silverwolf was owned by a former adventurer and served adventurer-hopefuls. Not only that, Goldilocks Erich had built up his base of operations for the Fellowship of the Blade here and trained his clan members in its spacious yard.

A few heads turned toward the door, in expectation of a familiar face. These new guests prompted an overall tenor of surprise from the crowd. Ogres were a rare sight anywhere in the Empire, of course, and while the city had a small but still disproportionate share of hedge wizards and stray mages thanks to the adventuring community, a specimen as dapper as Mika was altogether unheard of. His clothes were decorated with beautiful embroidery. Areas which seemed empty were actually stitched with transparent thread to mute the palette somewhat and emphasize the patterns. There were few adventurers in the entire world who dressed so fashionably.

The pair evidently looked like a noble-ish sort and his bodyguard, but what in the world did they want here?

The ogre ignored the crowd's inquisitive looks and instead scanned the crowd for the man he sought. There was only one person who bore the telltale golden hair and blue eyes.

Upon a barstool in a corner, a man sat alone, a cup of ale in one hand and a fistful of bar snacks in the other. His posture was straight, his frame tall and muscular. Standing, he would have come in at neck height to the ogre—who was, himself, very much a median specimen of his people. Beside the man hung a carefully wrapped sword—peace bonded for the safety of the masses. It was of average length and fit the profile of the very blade Goldilocks had brandished in the stories.

His hair didn't "gleam like rays of dawn spun into thread" like the stories went, but that much, he knew, was a matter of poetic

license. The ogre didn't quite see his "beauty like a fresh breeze," but he could link the man before him to the legend who had met the oath-crusher and his blighted war hammer blow for blow on horseback.

The ogre approached the gold-haired man with big steps and called out in his most polite voice. He had rehearsed his approach in his head and workshopped with Mika endlessly in hopes of arriving at the optimal first impression. The palatial dialect felt clumsy, alien, unfinished even as the words left his mouth.

"Um... May I have a word..."

"Hm? Oh, wow, an ogre. Man, you're big!"

The gold-haired man must have been lost in his drink and uninterested with the newcomers to the tavern, for he fixed his attention on his high-looming admirer with a start.

It is worth pausing to paint a slightly more detailed picture of the scene. Of course, seeing an ogre was a surprise in and of itself, but this one in particular had quite the intimidating face. His fangs rivaled the lengths of even his women clan-mates, and his angular visage had the intensity of a statue in motion. The gold-haired man couldn't help but think of an idol of a foreign god stepping on a wicked creature that he had seen amid a load of goods delivered from the east.

Neither knew what to say next. The ogre had forgotten every single line he'd ever practiced in a fit of starstruck panic. The gold-haired man was racking his brain for what he had done to warrant an ogre visitor—*Did I do something? I was just having a drink! Oh wait, maybe it was back then... Maybe...?*

And so they didn't register the door to the yard opening, and the group that came into the tavern chattering all the while. All of them were dressed in easy clothes and their bodies radiated the heat of a freshly finished drill. Most were drenched in so much sweat you could wring it out of their clothes. They were covered in mud and bruises and had training weapons in their hands—swords with smoothed edges; blunted spears; steel cores jacketed in wooden simulacra of proper blades, such that the wielder could familiarize themselves with the weight and balance of the real thing. All bore

the weathering of a hot-blooded day of practice.

"Whew, today was pretty rough."

"You said it. Someone was really going for it!"

"Makes you wanna...not quit, but damn this is gonna sting tomorrow."

"Hey, barkeep! Bring out the ale!"

They were a young and motley bunch, cheerfully talking about their recent training. Although they each had a different weapon in hand, they were bound by the bottom-rung adventurer's tags around their necks. Most were soot-black, with a few ruby-reds among their number—it was clear that they'd only just taken up the adventurer's road.

One of the young rowdies in the middle tossed a silver piece as he said, "You all did good work out there today. This first round's on me. Barkeep, the usual, please."

Whoops and cheers went around as complaints from other tables came up that they weren't getting a drink in too.

Two loud voices cut through the rabble.

"Are you Mister Goldilocks Erich?"

"Old pal!"

The first was the ogre's heavy voice who had finally worked up his nerve to talk to the man before him. The other was a slightly high-pitched man's voice, which had been trained to ring true.

A chorus of "What" and "Huh" rippled across the tavern. Some even cried out, "That ain't him!"

Then came a third voice, belonging to the adventurer at the center of the group, whom the handsome mage in the splendid robe dashed, no, practically *leaped* at.

"Mika?!" he said, nearly struck dumb.

"Indeed, Erich! It has been an *age*, old pal. What a thrill to see you hale and hearty!"

The man at the receiving end of the full-body tackle-hug was a young man in baggy commoner's clothes with a shallower sheen of sweat on his brow than his fellows. He wasn't tall or bulky by any stretch of the imagination. His golden hair, tied up in a bun but still trailing behind him, positively gleamed in the poor light that filtered

through the skylight. His baby blue eyes glittered with a young boy's joie de vivre. Erich of Konigstuhl gladly received Mika's high-flying embrace, completely unfazed at the prospect of being hugged by a man taller than him, and spun a few times to mitigate the intensity of the collision. Yes, the man that the ogre had been looking for wasn't on the barstool next to him, but wheeling about in the arms of an old, dear friend, with a brilliant grin pinned up on his face.

[Tips] In an age without photography, it is difficult to locate someone you've never seen on features alone. That goes especially for players in heroic tales and adventurous sagas that are prone to embellishment.



The reunion between these two dearest of friends began with a warm embrace. After a few spins to disperse the kinetic energy of the leap, the two looked at one another. Both had changed since they saw each other last. Now closer to men than boys, both were taller and both had a more gallant look on their faces.

Erich took after his mother with his naturally feminine features, but through years of tough jobs and fierce battles he now had an aura of authority about him. There were few left who would mock him at first sight for looking like a woman—even those who didn't even know his merits as Goldilocks. Armor-clad and sword in hand at the vanguard, he had the fierceness of a war god, able to rouse his fellows and strike terror into his foes.

The mage had a similar boyish beauty about him when he smiled, capable of making men and women alike blush, but he too wasn't as weak or frail as he might have seemed. That androgynous charm he had—as he was, able to pass as a woman with a little bit of makeup—glittered just as brightly as it did in the adventurer's memory.

With broad smiles upon their faces, the pair wordlessly looked at one another, close enough to feel each other's breath, before breaking into a huge hug. The embrace was tight, hands placed as far around as they could go. Tears welled in their eyes. Despite their taller frames and their steps closer to adulthood, their irreplaceable friendship hadn't changed a jot. Their time shared hadn't shaken loose; their bond of camaraderie was as strong as ever. The chief reason why the core of their friendship had stayed firm was the absolute joy they felt in each other's company.

"Old pal, you haven't changed in the slightest!" Mika said.

"I could say the same, old chum! Although...you've gotten taller than me, you cad!" Erich replied.

"Ha ha ha, well I'm happy you're as cute as you ever were."

"I see the cheek on you is unchanged!"

Erich and Mika finally freed one another from the hug, but their hands were on each other's shoulders as they chatted with joy. They teased each other and chuckled, occasionally giving the other a light bantering punch. They were like two boys in the playground.

Everyone else in the room was utterly lost. All present knew

either one or the other of this odd couple. For the residents of Marsheim, it was so strange to see their rising star so at ease with this mysterious mage, clad in such beautiful robes that many would mistake him for a noble. No, "odd couple" wasn't quite right; the two were strangely *alike*. Everyone scratched their heads, wondering how exactly these two knew one another.

"Um... Boss?"

"Uh... Professor?"

The mind's flywheel came unstuck and began to work the tongue first for an audhumbla lad, fresh and almost steaming from the training session in the yard. The second voice belonged to the newly arrived and still much bewildered ogre.

As if he had just noticed the crowd, with his arm still around Mika's shoulder, Goldilocks introduced the mage with the matchless pride and joy of a new father.

"This is Mika! An incomparable friend of mine. Give him the respect he deserves—he's set to make the whole damn arcane community look like *pikers* once he gets his professorship!"

"Enough of that... Right now I am a mere College student, far from even a magus."

The lid on his excitement apparently gone, Goldilocks warmly brought Mika to the round table at the back of the room which had become his regular spot. He pulled out a large silver piece from his pocket—it had been in a secret pocket next to his chest to only be used in emergencies—and tossed it to the barkeep.

"A celebration! Everyone—eat, drink, and make merry!"

"One drink a head to start, then?" the owner said after a brief pause.

"Outstanding, my good man. If the tab runs out, then merely call my name."

The owner of the Snowy Silverwolf knew that Goldilocks's purse strings were already loose enough when it came to treating his fellow clan members, but he didn't say anything in the face of the young adventurer's excessively high spirits. He merely sighed and sent one of his servers to the cellar. It was evident that what they had behind the counter wouldn't be enough for this party.

In response, all the adventurers—and a few stouthearted civilians among the clientele who had stayed—gave a raucous cheer before heaping praise on Goldilocks and his newly arrived friend. Those already with drinks raised them into the air and called out the mage's name. Those without announced their thanks in anticipation of the festivities.

"You must be exhausted from your travels," Erich said. "The prices here are cheap, but the food and booze are good. The owner's from the far north, so the house specials use lamb."

"Ooh, now that sounds a treat," Mika replied. "Perhaps even better than our reunion."

"You wound me! Does it bring you joy to see me cry, chum? To be rated lower than lamb, why, I might slaughter every sheep in Ende Erde in my sadness!"

"T'was mere banter, old pal, don't frown like that! Your life is more precious than my own, so I beg you, spare the sheep."

The pair settled into their seats, naturally remaining at each other's side. The adventurers from the training session placed a bottle of alcohol before Goldilocks. As for the mage, he gestured for the ogre to join them.

"Sorry for keeping this from you, Yorgos," Mika said to his former traveling companion. "Such is the shape of our relationship."

"You've made quite the stalwart friend, Mika," said Erich.

Mika chuckled. "Listen and be surprised, old pal. Yorgos hails from a rustic corner of the lands bordering the Southern Sea. He came all the way to Marsheim after hearing of your feats!"

Yorgos approached the table with tottering steps upon Mika's kind introduction, but he was desperately trying to catch up with the situation and put his thoughts in order.

So *this* was Goldilocks.

Yes, his hair lived up to his epithet, shining like golden wire spun by a master artisan. The ogre had no qualms about that half of the stories. The problem, in Yorgos's eyes, was that he was too *small*. His frame didn't seem all that different from that mage's—his traveling partner whose delicate behavior played upon the ogre's sentimental nature, coaxing out his urge to aid and wait upon the

fellow. Putting that aside, with the benefit of the doubt that his baggy casual clothes masked his figure, Goldilocks was *short*. Shorter than Mika, that was for sure. Yorgos knew that farmers often ended up a bit on the scrawny end, growing up on lean pickings as they often did, but compared to the other adventurers he seemed practically malnourished. Yorgos simply couldn't accept the truth that this man before him was a hero, the Bandit Slayer, the one who had brought an end to the Tyrannical Knight. He looked like he would be better suited to formal wear, waiting upon a noblewoman.

Despite all this, why were alarm bells—honed by his upbringing among warriors—ringing in Yorgos's head?

It was a strange feeling, akin to looking at a kitten and knowing deep in your bones that your life was in danger. The contradictory nature of Goldilocks's seemingly harmless appearance with the possibility of hidden depths scratched at Yorgos's instincts, sending goose bumps rising across his metallic flesh. This hidden intensity he felt was far stronger than what he felt from the easy way mighty warriors from his own tribe held their cups. Doubts started to creep into Yorgos's mind: *Is this man really a mensch?*

"Allow me to formally introduce him," Mika said. "This young man helped me out a lot during my travels and even brought my belongings into Marsheim. I think you can tell him your name yourself, right?"

"R-Right..."

Yorgos's preconceptions about Goldilocks and the surprise of actually meeting the man had thrown the workings of his mind out of whack, but with Mika's encouragement, he managed to finally introduce himself. Unfortunately none of the words or phrases he had prepared came out, leaving him with the simplest of terms.

"My name is Yorgos of the Cyclops tribe..." the ogre finally said.

"Yorgos, huh," Erich replied. "Ah, a southern name! Etymologically speaking, I suppose you would be Georgius if you were born in the Empire. A valiant name."

Yorgos sat down with their encouragement and took an empty cup from Goldilocks's hand.

The more he looked at Erich, the more confused he became. His

aura and his appearance were just so at odds with each other. He couldn't seem to bring together the gallant tales of Goldilocks's heroic exploits, that slender frame that an ogre could crush with a single hand, and the fearsome swordsman's sanguine scent...

Erich slowly poured out Yorgos's drink as he returned the ogre's scrutiny. His eyes narrowed and a smile appeared on his lips.

"Do you take me for a weakling, *boy*?" Erich finally said without much care in the world.

"Excuse me?"

What did Yorgos have to be surprised about? Ogres developed faster than mensch, so he was definitely Erich's junior by a number of years; however, they were around the same age in physical appearance and mental maturity. Goldilocks couldn't have been referring to any outward deficiency. No, he *knew* the thoughts in Yorgos's head. He had the toughness to laugh in the face of someone underestimating him.

"It's no matter," Erich said. "I'm well aware I don't cut the most threatening figure. I dream of growing a beard, but it just won't grow out."

"A beard?!" Mika exclaimed. "No... I can't picture it..."

"You injure me, old chum! I see that you too are silky smooth despite passing eighteen."

With a cheeky smile Erich grabbed Mika's chin and pulled it closer to him and saw that there was barely any hair there at all. It was a tivisco trait. Anything extraneous calved away during their transitions, and so most of them lacked all but the most profuse hair.

"You're a mage," Erich went on. "You have a ton of ways to remedy any beard issues."

"Well, that may be but...a certain *lady* has opinions about these things."

"Ah... I getcha..."

The pair bantered on as the ogre and Goldilocks's Fellows stood awkwardly—the latter group with taut expressions at the fact that their boss was being treated with such levity.

Goldilocks must have seen the meaning that lay behind the mage's final words; he drained his glass before standing up to make

a proclamation.

"Follow me, all. We need to give this lad the welcome he's due, to come all the way from the Southern Sea on aught but a whim and a tale!"

The audhumbla stood up in response to Erich's call for a weapon and handed him a wooden sword.

"Time for a quick lesson." Erich spun the sword in his hand with a smile. "And how better to convey a lesson than through the blade, hmm?"

It was in that moment that the ogre finally realized how a hero came to earn their praise in song. All it took was a sword in his hand for Goldilocks's aura to change in an instant.

His instincts were right; this adventurer was a wolf in a kitten's clothing...

[Tips] The disparity between one's appearance and reputation has a way of affecting how people view you, often obscuring the plain facts before them.

Now that I had reached the age of eighteen here in the Empire of Rhine—well, to split hairs, I had seen nineteen years so far—I should have been able to grow a decent beard, but thanks to my alfish favor, I just couldn't rid myself of my boyish looks. By now I had pretty much given up on fighting it; I'd become the object of a worldly miracle of such potency that it overwrote the very powers of self-authorship the future Buddha had handed down to me. All the same, I still couldn't *quite* swallow it.

If things had gone according to plan, I should've at least been one hundred eighty centimeters tall by now, and I'd be packing a whopping ninety kilos, with a decently muscular bod to match. Alas, reality was a harsh mistress. Here as on Earth, you couldn't always get what you want. At the end of my growth period, I'd grown no taller than I'd been at fifteen. My looks, too, were barely changed, and when I looked at myself each morning in the mirror I longed for at least *one* cool scar.

I'd made my peace with the whole follicularly challenged

situation. In the Empire, growing out a well-maintained beard or being clean-shaven were equally respectable. People could just assume that I had purposefully chosen the latter option. The discrepancy between my boyish looks and the aura created by Oozing Gravitas and Absolute Charisma—which I had *finally* acquired after cashing in a load of my experience savings—still confused some people even now. I had accepted my lot, and I wasn't so small a person as to blow my lid at someone looking down on me because I didn't cut the most macho silhouette.

But damn, this guy—what was his name again, Yorgos?—had it *good*. I bet he had never been ganged up on once in his life! Even in the sleaziest bar, I bet he could have drinks on the house with one single bronze coin and get it back before he left.

The lesson I wanted to teach him was that this business wasn't one where you could get by on looks alone—it didn't count as *bullying* if they wanted to become a Fellow of their own accord—but someone stood in my way just as I was making to head outside.

"Boss, leave this to me."

"What's up, Etan? This isn't like you."

Etan was an audhumbla, so I couldn't tell whether the blood had rushed to his cheeks or not through the fur, but the raised veins in his arms betrayed his fury.

"So many folk've been comin' here and lookin' down on you lately."

"You think?" I replied. "Didn't *you* say that I was suited to weaving?"

"Please forget that already, Boss!"

As I teased Etan with a little memory of our first meeting, he waved his hands in front of him to get away from the topic as soon as possible, evidently still incredibly embarrassed about the whole thing. At a table nearby I saw Mathieu, who had trod the exact same path as Etan, spit out his ale.

"Anyway! I don't want you to draw your sword so easily, Boss. We've got our own pride too," Etan went on, his arms crossed in front of him. A few cheers of approval came from some of the other members of the old guard.

Really, Etan? I thought you guys loved the Fellowship because you got direct tutelage from me and Sieg! Catching a mild beating from the two of us is part of the rite of entry, no?

I looked around me and saw that everyone (well, except for Martyn) was pretty hyped to get started on Yorgos's first lesson. They had surrounded the newcomer and were moving back out into the yard. Some non-Fellows in the crowd looked a bit put out that a pause had been put on the free drinks and booze, but the majority took it on the chin and got up with drinks in hand to at least enjoy the show.

I was happy that people looked up to me, but I really wished that they could talk to me without it being such a high-stakes affair. But, well, that was part of being the boss, I guessed. I didn't want to be put on too high a pedestal, but at the same time I needed to command the respect that the position demanded.

"Don't overdo it," I said, acquiescing.

"I ain't a newbie no more. He won't leave with a single bone broken," Etan replied.

In truth, I wasn't all too worried about Etan. Injuries during practice were caused by inexperienced sword fighters, and he'd put in his hours in practice and on the front line alike. I trusted him enough to give him only the one small warning. I did feel sorry for poor Yorgos though. His face was positively blue! Well, ogres were blue regardless, but even I could tell that the blood had all but drained from his face.

"Right, let's get you to the yard, newbie," Etan said. "I'll give you a taste of Goldilocks Erich's training regimen!"

"Oh, uh, wait..."

I suspected that Yorgos had rarely if ever had someone of another species but similar height sling their arm around his shoulder before. The ogre and the audhumbla were surrounded by my Fellows as they headed outside.

"Oof... Are you sure this is going to be okay, Erich?"

"Don't sweat it, Mika. My kids know their limits. I've trained them well enough not to damage the fresh meat; they won't so much as dislocate a thing."

Injuries, training injuries especially, were a skill issue. In my own case, I had the best teacher anyone could ask for, so my painful memories were only limited to coughing up a little bit of blood. I had never experienced a broken bone let alone a fracture.

Some folks took pride in their wounds, but the only ones worth crowing about were sustained on the job. In the Fellowship, we were of the mind that injuries during practice were marks of idiocy. Training was geared specifically to keep you from dying. If you managed to get injured despite that, then you might as well hold up a sign that said: "I'm an idiot who doesn't know his own limits."

One of the qualities I used to decide if a Fellow was ready to teach their juniors was whether they had the skill to complete a round of practice without anyone getting actually hurt. Etan was, as his size would suggest, blessed with incredible physical strength, but he also knew how to control it. I had made sure that all of the old guard understood how to partition their strength. Just as you could carry an egg without it breaking or yank the stopper out of a bottle without overdoing it, I wanted them to be able to know how to put enough oomph into cutting someone down and only lightly graze someone with their sword stroke. A key member needed to be able to pass their knowledge onto the newest recruits. Equally importantly, someone who couldn't control their strength would always be a half-baked swordfighter, even if they were skilled at killing.

"To be honest, I'm more surprised to see an ogre *man* wanting to be a swordfighter," I said. "Let's see what he has to offer."

With drink in hand, I headed to the yard to see Etan and Yorgos standing about ten paces apart.

The onlookers had all settled somewhere comfortable, and some non-Fellows were (very uncouthly, if you asked me) making bets. I made sure that everyone in the clan looked and acted respectably, so they weren't involving themselves in making a bit of money on the performance of others in public—though I wouldn't have been surprised if they did so in private. It seemed like most were betting that this match would be over in half a minute, tops.

"Look at them..." I muttered.

I wanted to tell them off, but I didn't want to ruin the mood. I would prefer they didn't place bets on how long this newcomer would last against one of the oldest members of the Fellowship—the man who had come to be known as the Great Wall.

"Damn... This is the biggest weapon we've got," Mathieu said, with a large wooden sword in hand and a troubled expression in his eyes.

We had prepared wooden swords for everyone that were made to be as similar in feel to their real weapons as possible—from length to weight—but we had nothing that would come close to the size of the sword on young Yorgos's back.

Yorgos's blade was of the same make I'd seen on ogrish women before, and they were far taller than him, never clocking in at less than three meters. The Fellowship was a diverse bunch, but none of us were packing anything quite so gigantic as what he'd brought. How many of us could even hold the thing, let alone swing it?

"No sweat, Mathieu," Etan said. "Newbie can use his own sword."

"Huh? Really, Etan? Ain't that in bad taste?"

"Won't be able to see how good he is unless he's got a weapon he's used to."

Etan swung his wooden sword—large enough to be a zweihander for us mensch—through the air as he warmed up. The whistling sound it spoke to how cleanly he was cutting through the air; each slice could fell a foe without wasting one iota of his stamina.

"Newbie, let me teach ya what it means to really learn the blade. Don'tcha worry—if you *do* manage to cut me down, I won't complain."

"I-I've lived through real battles too," Yorgos said. "Don't look down on me."

It seemed that Yorgos had finally had enough. His cheeks flushed—in an ogre's case, that meant your blue cheeks would turn navy-black—and shook his weapon free from its bag.

"I won't take the blame if you get hurt," he went on.

"You're on," Etan replied. "Come on, playtime's begun."

Etan swung his sword a few more times to egg the young ogre on. Yorgos's patience had finally broken; he let out a howl folks

could hear from a few blocks out.

Ooh, he's coming at it with all he's got.

Etan returned his own oxish bellow as the welcoming party for our newest potential member began.

[Tips] The Fellowship of the Blade welcomes races one and all, but Yorgos is the first ogre to wish to join.

The Snowy Silverwolf, the Fellowship of the Blade's favorite haunt, carried equipment for adventurers. The number of training weapons and targets in the yard made it look more like a military training ground. Yet the lively atmosphere as two hefty young men faced one another was nothing like what you would see on an army base.

"Training in the Fellowship comes to an end if you land a hit on your senior or if you feel too beat to go anymore," Etan said. "Come at me with all you got."

"A hit with this?" Yorgos said. Sparks flew as he gritted his teeth and pulled out his hefty sword. "I hope you won't be complaining later."

The sword in Yorgos's hand had been taken from a storehouse back home. It hadn't belonged to anyone—free for anyone to take and use. Most ogres made their living through mercenary work or simple plunder, and with such a high percentage of their social contributions relying on their martial might, it wasn't surprising that the sword had been forged to exacting standards. It was heavy and it was sharp.

The heft and cutting edge of the blade were enough to wring a whimper out of nearly anyone made to contemplate it from the business end, but the audhumbla's experience and confidence overrode any instinctual fear. His wooden sword was poorly matched in this bout, positively crying with his willingness to take it on.

Many made the assumption that ogrish sword arts treated the blade as little more than a metal club—a crude extension of the wielder's own mass and muscle. In truth, there was far more nuance and depth to such swordsmanship.

Female ogres often measured over three meters in height and weighed multiple hundreds of kilos. They could do things with their raw strength that would seem utterly absurd to an outside observer. The swords that they wielded usually measured at least two meters in length. Of course, some tribes singled out arms that outsized their own masters, but the Cyclops tribe favored swords of more reasonable proportions.

Yorgos was far larger than any mensch. However, even his great size wasn't enough to skillfully wield a sword meant for someone bigger than *him*.

"Graaah!"

"What's wrong?!" Etan shouted. "Look how unguarded you are under your arm!"

With a roar, Yorgos turned in place, heaving the blade from his shoulder in a vicious diagonal arc. Yorgos's method was derived from his own fighting instinct and his observations of his tribesfolk. It had served him well enough. He had defeated mercenaries seeking an ogre-slayer's glory and laid waste to the bandits who attacked the caravans he had traveled with. His swordsmanship was useful against the mishmash of weak warriors that the Fellowship called "scrubs." The sword itself was heavy and had a long reach. The heft of the metal stirred up ancient reptile-brain terrors and crushed armor. Yorgos had survived until now on the promise that if his swings *connected*, the fight was over. However, today his full-body swing didn't meet flesh.

A scooping sword swing from below struck Yorgos's blade and threw his swing off its mark.

"Ngh...!"

"Yah! You died just then!"

Yorgos had left a big opening under his arm, and Etan had taken it. The audhumbla had struck at the ogre's side with his wooden sword as he deftly passed him by.

Yorgos's flesh, fortified by his natural strength, daily grunt work, and diligent training in pursuit of his dream, had repelled Etan's sword. However, the strike was strong enough to have killed a mensch—leaving them gurgling in their own blood with a pierced

lung and a host of cracked ribs.

Etan's strike had enough power to send a rippling shock wave through to the ogre's alloyed bones, despite his armor. It was more than enough to render Yorgos unable to fight back.

"Don't let death stop you!" Etan roared. "You gotta have enough grit to return the damn favor!"

It was a sign of Etan's skill that he hadn't managed to break his metal-cored wooden sword. Etan had deftly slipped past Yorgos—in a real battle, this was to avoid being crushed by the slumping hulk of a freshly dead body—and Yorgos felt a tinge of pain at his retort. The pain of the hit was manageable, but it had forced a trail of spittle to escape the corner of his mouth. He swallowed it down and made to strike back.

The ogre channeled the energy of his redirected slash and swung his sword. He anchored one foot to the ground and spun like a top as he prepared a vertical swing, but Etan's wooden sword struck at his fingers as if berating him for such a pointlessly showy windup.

"You're too slow! You ain't meant to be a *static* target!"

Although Yorgos's mensch-sized blade—able to produce gusts with each slash—and fierce ogrish intensity put the pressure on Etan, it was still not enough to best a Fellow who had lived on the battlefield and been reared into a beast.

The pain of the blow to his fingers froze Yorgos where he stood. The slight pause in his overhead swing allowed Etan to move a half step to the side and avoid the blow. Etan shifted behind Yorgos with light steps and kicked at the back of his knee, dropping him to the ground. The audhumbla's wooden sword grazed Yorgos's exposed neck.

"Even an ogre's weak here. Doesn't matter if you're armored either. Any fool can cut you open from this angle."

It was a fatal strike. An ogre might have been a walking calamity, but their physical structure was the same as any other human's. It might have taken a little more strength to cut through Yorgos's skin, but his weaknesses were the same as your average mensch's. The tissues of the neck and throat were thinner and could never be conditioned as much of the rest of the body could be; a clear shot

there would invariably end the fight. In his mind's eye, Yorgos saw blood gushing out from a fatal wound.

"D-Dammit...!"

"Yes! I like that fire, newbie!"

But this was training. Even if he had received a strike that would end his life in the real world, here he lived on. Etan told him to keep going as long as his energy allowed, and so the ogre put aside his "death" and put some strength back into his legs.

Yorgos unleashed a powerful, two-handed vertical slash. Etan had been close after the kick and ready to repel the strike, but he took the attack full-on, to some considerable surprise.

"Gruh... Graaaagh!"

"Raaaah!"

Etan knew that if he took Yorgos's blade head-on his wooden sword would shatter, so he locked swords at their hilts. Each warrior put all of their weight into the push, their shirts threatening to rip under the strain of their muscles; the veins on their foreheads and arms bulged with the effort.

The ground started to churn under the strain of two boots and two hooves; sweat poured from them both in the clash.

"You...ain't too shabby!" Etan said.

"Ngh! Grrrgh!"

No matter how much Yorgos pushed back, Etan's tenacious strength wouldn't give in. Audhumbla weren't the most agile of races, but they had the endurance and beastly strength expected of their oxen blood. If it came to a test of brawn, then they wouldn't dare to yield in the face of any foe.

After a few seconds of this fierce clash, the ogre went flying. An opening of a few moments as he expended his last drop of energy was more than enough—Etan had pushed with his sword and tackled the newcomer.

"Grah...! Dammit all!"

However, Yorgos's own personal training with the sword had borne some fruit. The ogre managed to hit the ground and transition into a roll without hurting himself from the impact or with his weapon. He used the momentum to lift himself back to his feet once

more, and leveled his sword straight at Etan.

It was a unique posture that made up for his scrawny size compared to the warriors of his tribe. He held the long hilt in his right hand and secured it under his right armpit. His left arm was placed along the blade with his hand clasping the top. He was leaning to the right slightly, but his slightly crouched posture brought to mind a vicious horned beast from beyond the Empire's lands.

It didn't take long for Etan to realize that this was different. Subconsciously he held his sword high—his most confident posture. He hadn't put his sword on his shoulder in the Zornhut stance; his blade pointed straight to the heavens and his hands didn't shake in the slightest. Etan was gearing up to perform a powerful vertical swing as his master had taught him. He no longer swung his sword like a glorified bat; this stance had both skill and weight behind it. It was a last-ditch technique unique to the Fellowship of the Blade, to be used when your only means to cut down your enemy came at the expense of your own life.

"Gruuugh!"

"Have at you!"

It was no surprise that Yorgos's attack was a charging thrust. However, with a speed and weight befitting his ogrish size, Etan realized that his only option was to strike him down. As Yorgos charged across the short span between them, a flame lit up in the audhumbla, ready to finally reveal his all.

The onlookers all held their breath, hanging on the shared thought that this might not be good. They all braced themselves for the sound of the clash...but instead a strange ringing sound cut through the yard.

It wasn't one sound. It was two metallic clashes that were so close together that they sounded like one.

"That'll be enough."

Even the watchers who had their eyes peeled hadn't noticed a small figure come speeding in between the two huge warriors.

"Whuh?!"

"Gwagh!"

Etan and Yorgos stumbled, their weapons flying from their hands.

Unable to control their residual energies, they went crashing to the ground.

Goldilocks Erich had seen Etan about to unleash his potential and could foresee one or both of the fighters getting horribly injured, so he had brought a swift end to the bout.

"Etan. I told you before, didn't I? Even with a wooden sword..."

"...I-I could crush a guy's skull..." the audhumbla replied to Goldilocks.

"Jeez. This is what happens when you try and show off in front of the newbie."

Erich shook his head before the two hulking warriors crumpled on the ground. He had ended their fight as easily as breathing. He spun the wooden sword—no one knew *when* he had taken it—before resting it on his shoulder and sighing in front of his oldest subordinate.

"What should you have done?" Erich said.

"Put my sword down...and told him to cool it."

"Exactly. All's good as long as you remember that. Watch yourself in the future, okay?"

Some of the larger races had a habit of succumbing to their tempers and struggled to take hold of themselves in the moment. Etan had gotten invested in the fight and hadn't noticed just how excited he'd gotten, so Erich had needed to give him a little reminder. In the face of this all, Yorgos's head was spinning, still unsure of what had just happened to him.

"So then, Yorgos of the Cyclops tribe," Erich said, standing before the ogre. "How was your first taste of the Fellowship?"

Yorgos instinctively took the outstretched hand before him, which drew him to his feet in one swift motion. Many onlookers oohed at how easily the little mensch helped the big ogre up, but he had easily sent the ogre's huge sword flying but moments before. Those who knew Erich's talents accepted the scene without hesitation.

"E-Everything happened so fast..."

Yorgos had processed nothing of the fight's end. His despair at falling so woefully short of Etan's swordsmanship still hung heavy on him. Back home, men weren't allowed the honor of even holding a

blade. To top it off, he was left incredulous in the face of this small mensch warrior. Yes, Etan was strong. Yorgos had just received the harsh lesson that nothing he could do—even throwing down his own life to achieve it—would be nearly enough to topple him. And yet, Goldilocks's power lay even further beyond. It reminded him of the well at night. You could peer inside, but it was impossible to see the bottom.

Yorgos had known many a fearsome warrior, yet never before had he felt so viscerally the difference in the scope of their abilities. Who knew that holding a sword could change someone so much? Erich had slipped out of his skin; now in his place stood a terrifying beast with a suffocating aura and a predator's grin as he slapped the mud off this newcomer.

"I must say, I'm impressed. You did well against Etan. Sometimes it looked like the sword was dragging you along, but I don't have any complaints!"

After getting the last bits of dirt from Yorgos's clothes, Erich put his wooden sword in his left hand and held out his free hand to the ogre.

"You showed me your mettle. You're talented enough to force Etan to give his all. Be proud. As of today, you are a Fellow of the Blade. We gladly welcome you."

"I-I... I..." Yorgos stuttered.

"What's wrong? You'll take my hand, won't you? Or did we not measure up to your expectations?"

Yorgos was so moved at the absolute presumptuousness of receiving an invitation from such an incredible swordsman as this that he couldn't do a thing for a moment! With tears streaming down his cheeks, he reached out to take Erich's hand, when...

"Theeere you are!"

...suddenly a boisterous call ruined the moment.

"Three years! Three years of looking for you, Erich of Konigstuhl!"

"I recognize that voice..."

The doors of the yard flew open, and standing there was a zentaur clad in full battle gear. Her name was Dietrich—a warrior known as Derek in her homeland.

"Hey, Dietrich of the Hildebrand tribe! It's been an age," Goldilocks called out.

"Good to see you fit and well," the zentaur replied.

"Me too, but...I wish you'd learn to read the room..."

Goldilocks retracted his outstretched right hand and awkwardly scratched the back of his head. Dietrich's sun-kissed skin took on a red hue.

"Is that what you say to the woman who waited for you for three years?! I'm going to show you just how much stronger I've become!"

"Umm... Oh yeah... I think I remember you saying something like that..."

"Come on, man!"

The zentaur approached with angry hoofsteps. She pulled out her halberd, its blade gleaming after much polishing despite how much blood it had seen, and stood before the gaggle of swordfighters.

"*Hmph*. I don't like your tone, but I see that you remember me at least."

"But of course."

"Then our duel is on, Erich of Konigstuhl. Prepare yourself—if I win, I'll be dragging you back home as my husband!"

The zentaur's bold statement sent the whole crowd into stunned silence...but only for a fraction of a moment. The yard exploded with noise. Any thoughts about the bets they had been making or about the welcoming party for the potential new recruit had been blown away. This was the first time ever in the Fellowship's history that someone had marched up to their door and demanded to take Goldilocks's hand in marriage!

The members of the Fellowship of the Blade were plainly shocked, and even the other curious onlookers flew into a frenzy—some dashed off to grab their friends, knowing full well that a bout of such magnitude and character had never been seen in the Fellowship's history and might never come again.

Mika and Yorgos were probably among the most shocked of all. They had chalked up the stories to Dietrich's usual empty bragging. To top it off, who knew that someone would so directly, so boldly—and in front of so many people—claim their love for someone by

martial means?

[Tips] Ogre blades are made without any thought or expectation that anyone other than an ogre warrior will wield one—not even male ogres.

One's social circle is a strange beast that shows up at the most peculiar times.

First I had an unexpected reunion with one of my dearest friends after years apart, and then he introduced me to a potential new Fellow. Right in the midst of this meeting, Dietrich had to show up—a connection I had made during probably one of the shittiest campaigns of my life in this world so far. I couldn't have pictured a day like this in my wildest dreams.

I didn't think she would remember me with *this* much confidence. I kind of wished she would read the room—or yard, what have you—a bit more, but that would have been expecting a bit too much from her. Fortunately, while there had been a lot of chatter when she'd made her big declaration, it seemed they'd calmed down. I think they'd just swallowed the ridiculousness of this whole thing.

"I haven't been playing around these past three years," Dietrich said.

With her weapon in hand, Dietrich's aura had obviously changed. Although she still had her boundless energy, her martial ability had been so finely honed that she didn't show a single opening. You might have thought you could land a hit anywhere on that large body of hers, but every inch of her was filled with her fighting spirit. She swung that damn halberd as easily as a kid playing with a fallen branch, and with all the natural grace of her own limbs.

I was starting to have a really hard time pinning down which of the day's happenings was supposed to be the main event.

"Someone—my sword," I said.

"Roger!"

"And your armor, Boss?"

Etan dashed off to get Schutzwolfe as Martyn timidly questioned me under the weight of Dietrich's mighty aura. I shook my head.

"Look at her weapon," I said to my Fellow. "One hit and my armor won't do a thing. I'm safer if I'm lighter on my feet."

"Heh, you get it," Dietrich said, striking her halberd on the ground with a thunderous sound. You couldn't get that kind of noise out of any old solid steel weapon; it had to have been magic. I didn't know how *many* enchantments had been placed upon it, but more than enough to do what she needed with it—its functional weight must have been multiplied several times over. It was a weapon of pure power, an embodiment of the philosophy of dominance through sheer brute force. There were very few practical small unit tactics problems you couldn't solve with more muscle. You could play all day finessing the mechanics and build synergies to turn a modest weapon into a deadly implement with a lucky roll, but in practice you could never raise as much hell as someone whose damage floor on a standard hit made your eyes water.

"Here you go, Boss!"

"Thanks."

Etan brought over my sword wrapped carefully in a cloth instead of just handing it to me out in the open. Rumors had started to run about it; some had even begun to call it a "holy blade." Theories abounded as to the secret of her strength—she had been enchanted to draw blood from whatever it touched, she had been forged from the gallstone of a dragon, et cetera, et cetera—but the truth was that she was just a normal sword. As her owner, it got me jazzed and a little embarrassed all at once.

I left the scabbard in Etan's hands as I drew Schutzwolfe. Her fang, cared for each and every day, glittered with a cold light in the sun.

One of the tidbits the rumor mill had generated was the notion that she'd been magic the whole time and never needed sharpening; nothing could be further from the truth. I would clean off the blood and grime after each battle and coat her with flaxseed oil. I sharpened her once per week and took her to the sword sharpener once per month. Thanks to my loving care, she was in perfect condition.

"Whoa, he's *serious*?"

"He's pulled out his fang!"

Some trace of my workaday first-world middle-class upbringing recoiled a bit at the crowd going ape just because I'd whipped out my sword; at the end of the day, I was just some guy, going about my business. Hype men had never really been a feature of my ideal life.

Come on guys, I have no other option! If I drew a wooden sword I'd be squashed flat. To top it off, unlike everyone here, Dietrich knew I could use magic, and she'd prepared appropriately by splashing out for an entire ensemble of enchanted gear. In addition to her familiar scale armor, which had been fortified by her village shaman, she had an array of rings, a necklace, and, to top it off, a dangling earring that decorated her damaged ear, all new to me, all top-shelf, and all tuned to make spells slide right off her.



I wondered just how much junk she'd sprung for just to chance upon these fine pieces. The logic went that you'd get lucky eventually if you bought enough, I guessed. My spells only worked on the processes of manifestation and mutation, mostly just exploiting real-world chemical processes, and I knew they'd sputter into nothing against her wards. I was certain even the Order would dissipate if I tried to use them against her.

My lips were dry. I knew it was uncouth to do so, but I licked them. I liked her aura.

"Yeah... It sure has been a while," I said.

"Ha ha! Nice, I got you to smile."

As I was wondering just how long it'd been since I felt this excited, Dietrich swung her halberd with another booming sound before pointing it right at my mouth.

"You always grin in the face of danger," she went on.

"Huh? Do I? Wait, was I smiling just now?"

I gradually closed the gap between us. I couldn't screw up here. One pace of hers was far larger than mine, and it went without saying that her halberd beat Schutzwolfe's reach maybe three or four times over.

Like a compass drawing a smooth circle, I walked in an arc to judge the distance between us, maintaining just enough of a gap to deter a sudden strike. I had a loose grip on my sword in my right hand. I spun Schutzwolfe a few times, but Dietrich didn't come for my taunt.

"You were. Way more than that last time," Dietrich answered.

"Huh? Was I? I...guess so?"

She was still slightly too far. Bridging the distance with magic wouldn't help either—again, because of that damn halberd. It was a mighty metal beast that even I would have trouble lifting. I couldn't even imagine just how fast its business end could fly when Dietrich swung it at full force. Worse yet, the centrifugal force speeding the initial blow let her set up the next swing just as fast. So long as she kept it revolving, the butt end of the halberd would come flying your way right after the axe end, so there'd be no time for a block or a parry.

Then there were her legs. They had gotten even mightier than before, and her hooves were fitted with spiked horseshoes that could easily stab right through armor. Just like how I'd given our combat boots metal soles to allow for powerful kicks, she too had made sure to weaponize every spare appendage.

Jeez, her hooves can strike right through a mensch's breastplate as they are, so what the hell does she think she needs the power-up for?!

We circled each other at the same pace, but were gradually getting closer. The time to clash would come soon.

And then, in my next pace, my toes finally entered her range.

In a moment, a surging wave of bloodlust came as Dietrich stabbed with her halberd. Instinctively I ducked to avoid the strike, but something felt off. Judging from our distance, it made more sense for Dietrich to have swung *down* with her halberd during her charge instead of thrusting it toward me. It was a long weapon, but it was far more suited to slashing or smashing—not thrusting. It wasn't meant to be pushed out as far as it could from long-range. Her range would be... Wait, this attack was *outside* of her expected range.

Taking a half breath to analyze the situation, I noticed that her hand was placed far down the handle, right near the butt end. She had been allowing the halberd to slide forward as she thrust it to get extra reach! It required absurd talent with a polearm as well as incredible upper body strength to switch from a double-handed grip to a sudden single-handed stab. I had thought her arms seemed slimmer than before, but here at the peak of her thrust they seemed bigger than ever and webbed with bulging veins.

She was good! The secret to deftly wielding a halberd was perfectly using your upper body and legs in tandem. Many zentaurs resorted to simple "mounted charge" tactics, but few made use of the benefits that their humanoid upper half gave them.

After the thrust, where she practically threw the thing forward, she suddenly gripped the halberd. It seemed like the attack had stopped, but no—as soon as inertia and the reaction had come to a dead stop, she allowed the weapon to fall and let its weight deliver

the next strike. If this was a clean hit, it would be game over for me. I shifted to the right out of my duck, riding my lingering kinetic energy, but the surprises kept coming.

"GRAAAAAH!"

She'd brought the axe around in a sideswipe despite it still being stuck half in the ground! How damn muscular had she gotten that she could maintain this kind of speed with a weapon that huge *and forcibly landscape the yard with it at the same time?!*

Inwardly nodding in approval, I decided to flee to the only place left to me: the open air. I leaped in what was known in my old world as a Fosbury flop. Like a fish, I jackknifed backward, releasing my strength as I felt the rush of the halberd passing underneath me.

That was close. The force of that blow told me that I'd have been crushed even if I'd been stuck with the weapon's slightly less deadly end. I landed and was about to get into a favorable range, thinking that this from-the-ground swing would leave an opening, but I was met with my third surprise of the bout.

"Raaaah!"

I honestly thought this rampage would've stopped at her carving out a me-sized gash in the dirt, but next she grabbed the shaft of her polearm in both hands to *spring up from the ground* and leap right at me. A pole vault wasn't such a big deal for your ordinary two-legger, but to see a zentaur literally fly toward me like this was equal parts amazing and terrifying.

I remembered that I'd advised her to train to use her entire body as a weapon; she'd really taken that lesson to heart!

As she neared me, I ducked under her two deadly front legs and was about to leave her a parting gift by slashing at her hind legs, but her small kicks in midair made them impossible to hit.

After evading this strangest of sights, I awkwardly rolled away to open up the gap once more. Apparently she didn't have *another* attack up her sleeve and she simply landed on the other side of the yard—literally scattering the onlookers from her path—and spat. She shot me a look of frustration.

"Tch... I thought I had you," Dietrich said.

"I felt a shiver run up my spine, you know?" I replied.

It wasn't empty praise—my whole back was slick with sweat. That little string of attacks would be able to smash right through my strongest barrier or even my sword army. However, I could tell from her own sheen of fresh sweat that that combination attack, despite being over in the blink of an eye, had drained quite a bit of her own stamina.

"Let's keep this show rolling!" Dietrich yelled.

"Oh crap! Outta the way!"

"Gah, this woman's mad! Keep your distance!"

The onlookers scattered and cried out once more as her spinning halberd roared. Dietrich was spinning it just far enough away to not graze anyone, but you couldn't really brush things like that aside with the excuse that "it didn't actually hit anyone." I'd need to dispense a little lecture later.

Dietrich's halberd twirled wildly on her right side as she charged forward once more. She had left her left side pointedly open and I could tell she was ready to trample me if I even dared to dodge or counter her on that side. If that was the case, then I'd have to take this head-on.

As usual, I hid my sword with my body and took my forward-leaning stance. Dietrich seemed to get excited too, for her pounding hooves increased their pace as she covered dozens of paces in no time.

I needed to hold firm a bit longer. My body's instincts begged me to dive out of the way of the multiple hundred kilos of woman charging at me like some lunatic on a Vespa. I ignored those alarm bells and stifled the urge to run. I couldn't rush this. I was dancing on a knife's edge; I had to wait until the final moment.

"Raaaaagh!"

A downward swing feinting into a sideways swing! *Now!* I thought as I leaped, hopping onto the halberd's blade as it passed.

"No freakin'—!"

"Hmph!"

I charged forward, and with a quick intake of breath, moved to swing Schutzwolfe for the felling blow, but in the final moment Dietrich regained her senses and brought her halberd's pommel up

to stop me.

"Ngh... You're light...but so heavy!" she said.

"I'm impressed you blocked that!" I replied.

She hadn't merely received my attack. Her left was in an underhand grip and her right was in an overhand grip, yes, but she had also hitched up her left leg to support the halberd. I couldn't quite push through all of that. I wondered if I should try to force my way through anyway, but in my mind's eye I could see myself flying through the air in a rather unseemly way after being blasted back by Dietrich's monstrous strength, so I capitalized on the force and the free moment to leap into a controlled somersault away.

I targeted Dietrich's back—her most vulnerable spot—and delivered a powerful blow. Not with Schutzwolfe, though. I had put my sword in my off hand and unleashed a slap with my dominant one.

"Eep?!"

A clear smack cut through the air. Dietrich's warrior's instincts must not have picked up on a bare-handed strike with zero bloodlust behind it, or she'd have been able to move in time. All the same, my strike had left a beautiful red handprint on her dapple-gray behind.

"Oops, looks like I didn't hold back enough there," I said.

"That *stings*! E-Erich, you little—!"

It seemed to take a few blinks for Dietrich to work out what exactly had happened to her. Once she did, she started roaring at me from a few paces away, her face beet-red. She flung her halberd aside and grabbed me by the lapel. It was evident that she had accepted my little smack as evidence of her loss in this bout.

"Forgive me, Dietrich!" I said. "If we mess up the yard, the owner's going to be pissed!"

"I'm so mad...! How... How could you touch my butt when all these people are watching?!"

That's what you're mad about...?

I wasn't exactly *expecting* that reaction, but I knew it wouldn't take that much to get her to cool off.

"Any longer and one of us would've ended up dead. I wanted to end things while it was still an upright battle," I reasoned.

"Ngh..."

"You've gotten a lot stronger since I last saw you. I barely recognized you out there!"

I placed a hand upon her bright hot cheek and was just giving it a stroke when it was smacked away—just a moment later than expected.

"I ain't a kid, dammit!"

"Ha ha ha! But we both worked up a real good sweat. All right, before we crack open the booze, a trip to the baths is in order. I'll treat you."

"Huh? Really? The booze too?!"

"Yeah, drink as much as you like! Don't hold back—today is the happiest of days."

Yep, if you knew what made her tick, her mood could be fixed up in no time. It seemed like she was the same as before: sated by praise, a bath, and a good drink. Lucky for me that she was still so self-serving.

"Listen up, everyone! We have to delay the party a bit. But as soon as we're all clean, the drinks will flow!"

I had two whole happy reunions in the space of fifteen minutes. I needed to make sure the party was up to par! No one complained about the deferral; they were too busy yapping about how exciting the two fights had just been.

Mm-hmm, I think I've got this kind of crowd control down by now.

[Tips] Most zentaurs view their upper bodies as finely honed weapons, but you won't find many who train their lower bodies with equal measure. After all, their hooves are already mighty enough to crush someone without the extra training.

Yorgos found himself shaking with awe at *the* Goldilocks Erich.

The lurching gap between his short stature and the power he emanated was one thing, but that was nothing compared to the transformation he made with a naked blade in his hand. The ogre

finally understood why that ogre adventurer had lauded this man as a godly warrior.

The arc of Erich's grin had stretched so far that it seemed as if his cheeks had been slashed open, stinking of phantom blood. Those baby blues of his took on a dangerous light, and to Yorgos it seemed like he became something whose only purpose was to swing that sword in his hand. It was as if he and the weapon were one and the same.

"So...incredible..." Yorgos murmured to himself.

Etan handed him a cloth, freshly soaked in the cold well water of the yard. It must have been the audhumbla's way of showing kindness after all the bruises he left on the ogre.

"Our boss is a true swordsman," Etan said. "He doesn't just live and die for the blade, no..."

"...He enjoys swinging it," Yorgos replied.

"Exactly."

Goldilocks Erich might not have realized it himself, but when he had his sword in hand, he always *smiled.* That smile would get wider the more ferocious his opponent was, and it was made all the more terrifying that he never actually let out a laugh. His opponent would never for a moment lose sight of their own imminent death in his glittering eyes.

"He's a true Fellow of the Blade. Anyone would wanna be like that," Etan went on.

"Yeah..."

It went without saying that Erich was strong. His Fellows were enamored with his way of life and his relationship with his blade, but the roots of their adoration lay deeper. More vital to it was the fact that when he was out there swinging his sword, he enjoyed himself to the fullest. He lived with a smile and no regrets. It was no surprise that people admired how he undertook the most bitter work in the world with joy in his heart.

"I can guarantee ya this," Etan said, "if you stick by him, you'll get stronger. As long as you can keep up!"

"What do you mean by that?" As Yorgos watched the intense battle unfold, Etan opened his hand before him.

"One in five make it through; the ones who don't end up leaving. There's all sorts of people who drop out for one reason or another. People who can't hack the training, fools who're content with everyone else's table scraps, lily-livered folk who're scared of dying in battle, and idiots who think the boss is a magician who can grant their every wish."

The Fellowship of the Blade was one of the most rigorous and regimented clans, with hellish training to boot. While Goldilocks didn't take entry fees and the like, and the clan itself was supportive, a lot was expected of any newcomer during those training sessions. Under the tutelage of the Fellowship, they were naught more than iron—to be blasted with heat and struck and struck until their every impurity was removed. Novice jobs were filthy; there was no secret to strength. Yes, the teaching was good, but Erich made it known that simply knowing the techniques did not mean that you were stronger.

"Then there are those spineless lot who get burned by the boss's blinding aura."

Erich drilled into those who made it through the preliminary stages that there were always greater heights to achieve, that the summit was still so distant. This hands-on lesson was conferred upon those who were ready to see their boss show more of his true talents in a personal bout. There were many clan candidates—ones who had not yet achieved official entry into the Fellowship—who couldn't accept their weakness after such duels and ended up leaving the Fellowship behind.

With each departure, Erich's eyes took on a sad color—a lonely look that he would no longer be able to dance alongside them. He knew best of all just how much it took to rush into the battlefield and become a true Fellow of the Blade.

"I'm prayin' that you're not any of those kinds of people," the audhumbla said. "Uh, Yorgos, was it?"

"Y-Yessir," the ogre replied. "Your name was...um..."

"Etan. I ain't yet got any songs written about me, but some folk've started calling me Great Wall Etan, y'know?"

As the fight was brought to a close with the resounding smack of

a palm on a behind, Yorgos finally took in his senior.

First of all, there was his physique. Yorgos was blessed with a huge form thanks to his ogre heritage, yet Etan was beefier by at least one order of magnitude. It was only after their bout that Yorgos could see just what aspiring to ever higher heights and greater strength could do to your physical strength and appearance.

"But, man, I'm happy to have a burly guy like you join!" Etan said. "To be honest with you, I'm sick of all the bodyguard work."

"Oh? Why?"

"Think about it. Imagine me in full armor, sword at my waist, standing next to someone. Who's gonna want to attack the person I'm guarding? It's dull, man. There's nothing more boring than just standin' around all day with a 'back off' expression on my face."

Despite Etan's obvious disappointment, even this kind of job seemed incredible in Yorgos's eyes. Wasn't it solid evidence of your strength if someone asked you to protect them with your very life? Even a country lad like Yorgos knew just how much of an honor it was to have someone pick *you* out individually to stand by and guard them. But it was evident that to Etan such jobs were just dull, dull, dull.

"To me an adventurer's someone who trades sword blows in the heat of battle. So, hey, here's hopin' that scary mug of yours will take some of the load off of me!"

What a day it had been so far for the young ogre. First he had traded blades with a trained warrior, then he had witnessed the boss of the Fellowship in an incredible bout, and now he had a beautiful, terrifying future to look forward to.

A small bud of fear settled in Yorgos's heart perhaps a little too late. *Have I perhaps been a little too starstruck to notice I've made a huge mistake...?*

[Tips] Bodyguard work often prioritizes frightening looks that will drive away potential enemies. As such, it is rare for someone who cuts as unassuming a figure as Goldilocks Erich to be personally requested by anyone other than a noble client. You can sometimes catch Erich scoping out his

more burly Fellows with a jealous look in his eye.

The laws of administrative control—that which nobles did not dare expose to common eyes—laid out recommendations for the facilities required by cities of different sizes. A city with a population of five hundred or more deserves a decent sewage system and public toilets. A population of one thousand or more deserves a public water supply and a large-scale fecal waste treatment center. Naturally public baths were part of the package. The baths were a point of cultural pride for the Empire, inviting many of its neighbors to sneer and deem its people neat freaks.

The Justus Imperial Baths of Marsheim had their own history. These public baths were named in honor of the defeat of Justus, one of the strongest of the high kings during the Empire's incursion and the forerunner of Ende Erde's seditionists—a provocative title in the modern political climate. The baths weren't too busy when Erich's group arrived. This was in part due to it still being fairly early in the day, but the better part of it was thanks to the fact that these baths, strangely enough, weren't *free*. It was evident that the government couldn't cut too many corners right at the fringes of the Empire. Common logic went that as long as you had food in your belly and a roof over your head, a bath could wait if it meant saving a few coins. Many in Marsheim lived in tents or labor camps; five assarii was a luxury well beyond their budgets.

Goldilocks, with his group in tow—many had decided to follow along when it became clear that the free drinks would come later—arrived at Justus Imperial Baths ready to shed the sweat and grime from their training session. Erich gladly paid everyone's entry, and the group split to their designated areas. While still only few in number, there was a growing contingent of women who aspired to become Fellows of the Blade.

Dietrich didn't have any qualms about this aspect of Imperial culture. She had been living within its borders for the past three years and knew by now that the zentaurs' mixed bathing habits would only cause chaos here—even if she thought it was all a bit foolish. Zentaurs and other races raised their young without concern

for gender, even having almost exclusively unisex names, but Goldilocks had made sure to educate Dietrich on this difference in culture.

"Oho, now this is quite something," Mika said.

"Striking, isn't it?" Erich replied. "Not every day you see the bath's namesake's head in the hand of the fifth Margrave Marsheim, commemorated in stone."

"Yes. It's so striking, in fact, that I think that when the revolts begin, these baths will be second to burn after the castle. I've taken a shine to it."

The mage and the adventurer made merry with a risky conversation that went over most of the adventurers' heads. They knew that Goldilocks had spent time working in the capital, and so he often said things that were difficult to understand, but now it was practically impossible to follow the conversation with this newly arrived "professor."

In truth, even many locals to Ende Erde wouldn't have known the legend of Justus by his real given name. The strongarms of the region who *did* know would be branded as traitors as soon as it passed their lips, and those who didn't never received the education to learn otherwise. As a result, none had spoken up, and thus the statue remained to this day—that of a gallant man holding up the head of Julius de A Dyne.

"Hm? Oh, right. None of you really paid much attention to who this was, huh?" Goldilocks noticed the astonished faces of his Fellows who shook their heads at the question, and remarked, "I'll have to add a supplementary lesson about him next time."

The adventurers knew by now that their education was important, but they weren't the kind of folks that got much excitement out of the process. Rhinian reading and writing had been drilled into them, and some folk who weren't so connected to the world of the educated couldn't stand their classes on history. They preferred hearing about it in verse, but it was part of their human nature to prefer to avoid learning the sensitive bits of history and in so doing open up whole new universes of social faux pas to consciously avoid. However, it was thanks to this education that

none of them had been eaten up and they could work to earn a decent wage. They decided the lesson might be worth a bit of bellyaching.

The scene was a lively one. Erich and Mika were walking with their arms slung over each other's shoulders, Dietrich had amassed a little following already, and even Yorgos had made a good first impression.

"Yo, newbie! You know where to put your clothes?"

"Huh? Oh, yeah, I think so..."

Etan was so pleased with a newcomer who could fill his shoes that he too had put his arm around Yorgos's shoulder, like an overly friendly drunkard in a bar. Each locker had a wooden token that could be slotted in to unlock the door. Etan kindly showed Yorgos how they worked.

"Since you're joining, we should get along!" Etan said. "I'll teach you about how things are done in the Fellowship."

"You will? Thanks so much, um, Mister Etan," Yorgos replied.

"Someone's enjoying showing the newbie the ropes!" came a teasing voice. It was Karsten—a goblin and another one of the Fellowship's oldest members. Yorgos was surprised to see the Fellowship had allowed in someone from such tiny stock, but his preconceptions were immediately thrown to the wayside when Karsten removed his shirt.

It was true that Karsten was small, but he had honed his body to its very limits. There wasn't an inch of him that hadn't been meticulously bulked, cut, and trained to perfection. His fingers were dotted with countless calluses, reminding Yorgos of the roots of an old tree. The vestiges of blade wounds across his body spoke volumes of the hells he had endured. Meanwhile Yorgos could count the number of times he had been in a real battle on one hand. He immediately felt foolish. It was plain to him from a single glance that even this small warrior had the inner strength to defeat him without much effort.

Yorgos imagined a possible battle with Karsten and only felt more certain that he would lose. How in the world would he be able to effectively strike at someone who only reached his knees?

"Well, I can see why Etan's so happy. For him the more scary-looking folk the better, eh?"

"Who're you callin' scary, Martyn?!"

The one whose little jab had earned the audhumbla's ire was a mensch named Martyn. He was almost conspicuously plain-looking for a Fellow: the spitting image of a country lad turned would-be adventurer. However, Yorgos could see that even in his current relaxed state he hadn't left a single opening in his defense.

Martyn had far fewer visual marks on his body compared to the other Fellows. Before Yorgos had arrived, the four oldest Fellows had been training with Erich, yet Martyn had about a quarter of the bruises and bumps that the other three did. Yorgos would only learn later, to his considerable surprise, that Martyn was the last among the four to pick up the basics of the sword. Yet it was clear even now that Martyn was the most skilled of them all at this point. Who knew what had happened to him in the intervening days?

When his companions inevitably pried into it now and again, the mensch merely smiled and said, "It's thanks to Goldilocks's mystical powers." It was clear that whatever teachings he had received, they had become a precious secret.

"I gotta apologize we stared daggers at you," the werewolf called Mathieu said. "But don't let it get to ya. We all kinda did the same thing to the boss too..."

"Yup. You were all like, 'How can this little shrimp be Goldilocks?!'"

"So were *you,* Etan! You were way worse, comparin' him to a weaver!"

The werewolf next to Yorgos bared his claws as Etan guffawed, recalling his embarrassing past blunder. Mathieu was as terrifying as the other three, in that he had zero openings. Despite being right next to Yorgos, the werewolf made almost no sound as he moved. He had a scar on his forehead, but the fact that he could tank such a hit and walk away intact and intelligible was a testament to his strength.

No one here was your average schmuck. Surrounded by these four incredible warriors, Yorgos felt like he had only lived a tiny

fraction of his life. But fear wouldn't allow him to run away after he had been so warmly welcomed. He steeled his own resolve and joined the rest in peeling off his clothes. As he did so, he got his own oohs of approval.

"You're in pretty good shape yourself!"

"Oh! Yeah, I was run off my feet back in my tribe," Yorgos replied bashfully.

A standard ogrish skirmish tended to involve a great deal of midrange exchanges of fire between, for lack of a better word, "living artillery." Yorgos's Cyclops tribe were fond of hucking boulders at their foes. The bulk of Yorgos's work was running fresh boulders to the firing line. When his betters had run out of spears—three times the size of those that mensch used—he was expected to dash onto the battlefield, ducking under the cross fire to collect them and bring them back for the next salvo.

Life as an ogrish peon was incredibly tough. First came the armor. It weighed a ton, and one of his daily tasks was to make sure the metal parts gleamed enough to see his reflection and the pelts looked like they were practically still attached to a living, breathing animal. When the women got wasted at their parties, he had to work with a team of other men to lug them back into their beds. Yorgos's tribe had settled within a once prosperous city surrounded by a huge wall. When skirmishes broke out, all the military engineering that went into keeping the fortifications up and the siege sustainable had been *his* job. Yorgos's body grew strong and sturdy through his daily work. It would be an insult to his muscular form to compare a puny mensch's body, no matter how well trained, to it.

Yorgos understood Etan and Mathieu. He had come all this way hearing the tales of Goldilocks, but when he saw him in the flesh he had reacted in much the same way they had. Now he simply felt a passing shade of their own past agonies.

The more he looked at Goldilocks Erich, the more he could see the refined upbringing he'd had. Although he didn't speak too poshly, he held himself in a genteel way that simply didn't suit the clothes that commoners wore. It was true that Erich had a strange

aura about him, but how long would it have taken Yorgos to see his true strength unless he hadn't seen him draw his blade?

"Take a good look," Etan said. Yorgos followed his outstretched finger and saw Goldilocks removing his loose-fitting top. Yorgos felt his breath stop in his throat at the sight of Goldilocks's muscle-bound frame. The supple threads of sinew intertwined with the ingenuity of a spider's weaving. It seemed as if his body were a machine designed to make perfect use of what was available to move exactly as it wished. The form was beautiful. His tendons were firm as steel wire, and the ridges of his muscles were laid out in an unmistakable but ever-shifting silhouette. From Erich's form, all Yorgos's preoccupations with size diminished to nothing; all he could sense in that body was *power*. Here was a body just as carefully honed and balanced as the most prestigious Cyclops warrior.

Yorgos could tell that Goldilocks's body could withstand any sword strike, no matter how heavy. Indeed, his body itself seemed like a freshly sharpened sword—and not just any sword, but a beautiful, cherished blade passed down the generations.

As Yorgos looked closer, he noticed that Goldilocks's perfectly pale skin bore no scars whatsoever. Even his joints, which should have darkened with use, gleamed like unblemished marble. Not even the most immaculate show pony of a bodybuilder could lay claim to such a flawless body.

"Impressive, huh?" Etan affirmed.

"Yeah... He's so toned, but he's got the skin of a maiden!"

"I thought I was pretty careful, but still, look at the state of me."

The audhumbla lifted up his right hand to reveal old scars encircling his ring and pinkie fingers. It was a common mark, the inevitable wages of misjudging a foe's swing—easy to accumulate once you were in the business for long enough.

"Heh, they flew off when I was havin' a clash at the hilt with some bastard," Etan went on. "Big Sis Kaya managed to patch me back up again, thank the gods. Unfortunately for ol' Karsten there, he lost his left forefinger when Big Sis wasn't present."

"Quit that, man!" the goblin protested. "Don't embarrass me in front of the newbie already! It was bedlam out there anyway; I

couldn’t even begin to start looking for it!”

“Look at Mathieu’s stomach. Pretty gnarly, eh? Almost lost his guts through that wound. Our boss was going on about abdominal pressure or something and managed to stitch him up in time, thank the gods.”

Every adventurer here had borne a wound or two, large or small, some received on the job, others still accumulated from the inevitable toll of day-to-day entropy. Yorgos was no exception. Raised lines of pale scar tissue snaked across his blue skin. If Goldilocks were a silk handkerchief, he felt like a well-used rag.

“Which is why,” Etan said knowingly, “we call him Erich the Unblemished when he’s not listening.”

“Got the picture?” Mathieu chimed in. “But, well, it’s something you won’t know until he’s taken you to the baths.”

“The asshole...” Etan muttered. “He dresses all baggy and such to make people underestimate him, y’know? Said folk’re easier to deal with if their guard’s lowered.”

Whether Goldilocks was aware of the gossiping of his subordinates or not, he didn’t show it; instead he was showing off his tempered body to the curious Mika, who couldn’t help but have a feel—for science.

“Heh, what do you think?” Erich said. “Things are a little more lively now I’ve got the firepower to boot.”

“I’ve got to say I’m quite impressed,” Mika replied. “And look at that ab definition...”

“Whoa! Quit that, that tickles!”

A handful of the adventurers watched Erich and his friend’s cajoling as it veered into full-on flirting and couldn’t stop their minds from wandering—they couldn’t help but remember that despite Goldilocks being the most deep-pocketed of them all, he *never* went to the pleasure district. If it weren’t for his constant partner, their idle thoughts would’ve delved deeper into more uncertain territory. But *then again*, their boss’s eyes did often wander. Goldilocks looked at the bodies of his subordinates with a touch of jealousy; envy was easy to confuse for other appetites. Top-class muscular fellows like Etan didn’t just get away with being looked at. Goldilocks came to

examine the course of their growth with his own hands. It wasn't a huge leap of the imagination for the adventurers to assume that their boss might bat for the other team.

"Yeah, but..." Yorgos murmured.

"Hm?"

The Fellows watched the pair with speechless expressions, but turned to Yorgos. Yorgos had a strange expression too; he was looking at Mika, who still had his clothes on.

"The professor's pretty impressive too."

Mika had been so busy teasing his friend that he hadn't yet taken his own clothes off. When he placed his hands upon his robe to remove it, the men in the audience all held their breath. Although everything about Mika suggested he was a man—from the cut of his shoulders, to his neck, to his waistline, even to his knees—for some reason his body had a luster to it. His pale skin glimmered and muscles rippled under the flesh. Despite his masculinity, his figure had a gentle allure to it. In particular, his back, which looked like a field covered in the first snow, had a bewitching nature to it that transcended gender.

The adventurers longed to touch that back. No woman they had been with before had garnered such a reaction in them.

For better or for worse, Marsheim was situated right at the fringes of the Empire. Women who sold their personal services were plentiful, and that number shot up when you included the ones who took to the streets, coming out of the semiofficial pleasure district. These were mostly men and women of rural upbringing, and so average fare in Marsheim for a night's paid company was just that—average. They had pretty faces and nice enough figures to interest their clientele, but they had the roughness and inelegant bearing that was to be expected of people who had grown up in the countryside.

The male adventurers had gotten used to this, and so the mage's natural grace compelled their eyes. From the way he undid his buttons to how he slid his sleeves from his arms and finally to how he folded up his carefully removed clothes—each action was performed with a womanly beauty. Paired with that faintly masculine

frame—so far a cry from their own—the adventurers were swept up in a feeling akin to tipsiness.

"I was surprised," Yorgos said. "When I was helping organize the bathing stuff on our travels, I thought I'd gone into the wrong tent!"

For Rhinians, baths were a must even when camping. Of course, it was nothing too complicated—a washbasin and buckets filled with hot water which could be used to wipe yourself clean. However, the mere presence of it allowed the average Imperial to feel comfortable and keep healthy.

Yorgos had been carrying the cauldron of hot water for Mika; he'd experienced the exact same emotions as his new peers. However, the scene hadn't quite been the same. It had been just after dusk, and the camp was sparsely lit by the bonfire and the moon and stars. Mika's body in this ephemeral light was more enchanting still. Yorgos had honestly been unsure if he was looking at the body of a man or a woman.

"And then...he asked if I could scrub his back," Yorgos said.

"You got guts, man..."

Ever since that moment, Yorgos had aided Mika as if he were a female ogre. Ogre men were naturally weak to women of any race, but even Yorgos didn't know why he felt the compulsion to do so much for the mage.

"What's the holdup, people? If you've undressed, hop in the water. Don't want any of you getting cold," Goldilocks said. His Fellows had all fallen silent; he cocked his head, uncertain as to what had struck them dumb. He swung his own towel over his shoulder with a slap, to snap them out of their reverie. He fell into his usual spiel about being clean and tidy.

"A postworkout bath is special, but it has other benefits too," Goldilocks said. He indicated to Yorgos to sit by his side as he soaked a bar of soap in a bucket of hot water.

There were a few iron rules that Goldilocks expected everyone in the Fellowship of the Blade to follow. One of these was proper hygiene.

Although being an adventurer sounded grand, the truth of the matter was that they were nothing more than day laborers without

registered addresses or even the guarantee of work. It went without saying that many of their ilk weren't educated and didn't have much financial wherewithal. Many didn't keep up with their personal hygiene to an extent that couldn't even be excused by their hayseed origins.

"If you don't wash, people won't think well of you, and you can kiss fame and fortune goodbye," Erich said.

Because many adventurers fell into this common stereotype, many newbies found themselves the objects of grave public stigma. No one respected an adventurer who couldn't even keep themselves clean, nor did they wish to task one with an important job. Even working a grunt job that paid only a measly quarter, a grubby adventurer would receive the respect proportionate to their own respect for their appearance.

Consider, then, what would happen if, among the filthy and muddy adventurers, a well-groomed individual set to task with an earnest heart—even if they didn't secure a particularly outstanding result.

"If you have a stack of muddy stones, your eyes are immediately drawn to the cleanest of the bunch. Who knows—you might pick it up, take it home, and even decide to polish it," Erich said, his words heavy with personal experience dating back to his earliest days as an adventurer.

Among Marsheim's adventurers, Erich had some of the cleanest clothes, the most well-kept face, and the politest speech. It was evidence that even such small things went a long way to alter the impression you gave. If a client was expecting a boorish soot-black or ruby-red adventurer, then you could leave an even deeper impression on them.

"Mathieu, if I remember correctly, a client bought you lunch recently, right?" Erich said.

"Yeah," the werewolf replied as he scrubbed his fur with a bar of soap. "It was a boring job, just luggin' around some stuff, but that free stew was pretty damn tasty."

Mathieu had done a great job, and so the client had whipped up a hodgepodge stew on the house. That wasn't all—he had often

received refreshing cups of water or tea, and sometimes even a bit of extra pocket change from clients that he was more familiar with.

"The small price of five assarii and a bar of soap once every three days brings with it great rewards," Erich said. "My advice for you, Yorgos, is to start building up a good bathing and laundry routine if you want to rake it in before long. If you start to get some savings, you can even pop an incense pouch into your clothes."

"R-Right, thank you so much, uhh..." Yorgos said before trailing off.

"Call me whatever you like," Erich replied in the face of Yorgos's hesitation. The ogre decided he would copy his new Fellows.

"Um, Boss...? What are you doing?" he asked.

"Isn't it obvious?"

Everyone thought the same thing at that moment: *He's asking because it* isn't *obvious!*

Goldilocks had dissolved a bar of soap into a bucket of hot water to set about with a hair wash. So far, so normal, at least for him. It made sense to use soapy water to clean your scalp and hair to ward lice and fleas from making their home there. What had confused the group was that Goldilocks was washing the *mage's* hair; all the while Mika swung his feet atop the stool like a happy child. The both of them seemed to think this was the most normal thing in the world.

"Is something wrong, I wonder?" Goldilocks said.

"Nothing in the slightest, old pal," Mika chimed in. "Ooh, more to the left. A Clean spell helps you out on the road, but there's nothing like washing your hair with hot water."

The Fellows were watching as their boss—an up-and-coming *hero* in Ende Erde—washed the hair of a young man whose eyes creased shut like a happy cat's. Erich responded to Mika's extra request with a broad smile on his face. While this might have been a strange sight for the onlookers, they weren't to know that this had been a common occurrence between the two friends since their days in the capital. If Erich could have, he would probably have pointed out that the Fellows had splashed hot water down his own back.

"You've been working out quite a bit, old chum," Erich said.

"I thought I ought to learn my way around a pole, just in case.

I’m practically scrawny compared to you, though! Talk about embarrassing.”

“Not at all. You’ve got good muscles—I’m impressed.”

Erich carefully washed Mika’s hair—strand by strand—and once he had finished, rinsed him off with a bucket of fresh water. Mika’s hair was sleek and shiny to begin with, but now the rays that came in through the skylight threw a halo of light off his pate.

After two or three rinses, Erich finally finished up his job, transparently pleased with himself. Now he took his turn and faced away from Mika. He sat down and began to unbraid his long namesake. It was hard to tell exactly how long Goldilocks’s hair was, as he created two three-strand braids and pulled them together in a bun on the top of his head, but when undone, it reached down to his waist.

Yorgos let out a bewildered sigh. Yes, this hair was more than fitting to be his namesake.

An adventurer might spend upward of a few months on the road for the average bodyguard gig. Yorgos was completely taken with how beautifully Erich managed to keep his hair despite his profession. Unbeknownst to anyone present, Erich’s hair had received a distinctly nonmortal blessing, and so his golden locks, so lush that noble daughters coveted them for themselves, shone with their usual brilliance.

One would have made for a bracelet of peerless beauty, in the vanishingly unlikely event that it could be parted from him.

“All right, I’m up next,” Mika said.

“Thanks, old chum.”

The adventurers were stunned by Goldilocks’s easygoing response. Those who had been in the Fellowship the longest knew that Goldilocks had never let anyone help him wash his hair. He always gave the excuse that it was too long and would be too much of a chore. It was a complete shock to see him actually allow someone else to take up the task.

The mage stood behind the swordsman, and with the care and gentility one would afford a work of art, he took the hair in his hands. Mika allowed the strands to fall between his fingers and,

without anyone noticing, he allowed his lips to touch it.



[Tips] The Empire's public baths are often free to make sure proper hygiene reaches all parts of the community, but some poorer areas charge an entrance fee for their upkeep.

Yorgos finished cleaning himself and followed his new Fellows into the steam room. As soon as he stepped inside, he recoiled in surprise.

The Southern Sea had its own bathing culture, but to a Rhinian it would come off as positively rudimentary—they were perfectly happy with huge, heated barrels of water which could give you a quick and efficient clean. In addition, it was far warmer down south, and so the saunas were a lot cooler. Southern folk enjoyed a long session in a lukewarm steam room as their bodies were gradually heated through.

Yorgos watched the parade of Fellows march inside, each with a towel wrapped around his waist. The position next to the woodfire was usually reserved for Goldilocks and his closest Fellows, but today Goldilocks invited Yorgos to take a spot right beside him. The steam room was already far too hot for the ogre, and in any other circumstance he might have declined, but he didn't want to look discourteous.

"Hmm... It's a bit tepid, don't you think?" Mika said.

"Huh?!"

The mage's words surprised Yorgos. Mika also only had a single towel around his waist—a choice that somehow felt simultaneously provocative and completely normal—and he still wanted to crank up the heat further? Yorgos had heard from Mika that he hailed from the icy reaches of the far north, where winter arrived sooner than it did anywhere else. These people from the polar region—like the people of the far east—preferred their baths *even hotter*. In the words of a great poet of the northlands: "Drink deep of poison first, and the dew shall taste of the sweetest nectar." Such logic simply did not cohere for a southerner like Yorgos.

"Yeah, I'm happy with some more heat."

"Crank it up!"

"Mm-hmm, you bet."

Worse yet, Yorgos wasn't just *alone* in his surprise—he was *outnumbered*. Yorgos took in the crowd and realized that much of it was made up of hardy, weathered demihumans and foreigners nostalgic for the nigh-scalding baths of home. Not one seemed out of sorts in these conditions.

"Then allow me," Mika said. He splashed some water on the stones above the fireplace—which were already as hot as hell itself—to fill the room with more steam. Then he threw a few more logs onto the fireplace itself. Plumes of white steam filled the room, oppressing Yorgos and burning his throat as he breathed in. He thanked his lucky stars his ogrish nostrils were already inured to the ravages of fire and smoke on the battlefield; it felt like his airways were being cooked.

Goldilocks tied up his hair and took on the steam with his entire body as if it were the most pleasant thing in the world. Those who were a bit reticent about the heat could solve their issue by moving closer to the entrance. Everyone found their comfortable niche within the heat but Yorgos, who felt like he was enduring some kind of fire torture.

Still, the young ogre couldn't turn down the kindness of his seniors. He decided he would tough it out and so sat down in the "best" seat that Goldilocks had offered him. Next to the fireplace, he wondered if he would spontaneously combust. The experience was marginally more pleasant than being on the receiving end of direct cannon fire or Great Work polemurgy.

"This is lovely," Mika said. "I can feel the exhaustion of my journey seeping out along with the sweat. Marsheim is farther from Berylin than I thought."

"That's right," Erich said. "I was so caught up in the joy of seeing you again that I forgot to ask you what brings you all the way to the Empire's peripheries out here in distant Ende Erde."

A few guffaws came up from the Fellows as they busted Goldilocks's chops for making their home seem rural.

"Would you prefer he call us the sticks?"

"Maybe the boondocks?"

Yorgos wondered—if a city of this size counted as part of the

countryside, just how big was Berylin? But the heat and the atmosphere stifled his response.

"It pains me to admit it, but I'm still but a College student, old pal. I'm currently out on fieldwork, at the request of my master. My cadre won't allow me to merely be an 'essay professor.'"

In the College, the term "essay professor" was pinned to those students whose only successes came about in their exams and publications. The College didn't necessarily look down on practical abilities, but it was a place where the pursuit of knowledge was generally expressed through academic papers. Academics were judged based on the efficacy and the precision of their magic, but one major factor in this assessment was the quality of their papers.

Someone with bountiful reserves of mana could never force their way through the College hierarchy, nor could someone who had fumbled their way through on mostly instinct get ahead—such people would be weeded out before long. This meant that if you could weather the harsh judgment of your professors and were deemed worthy of merit, then one well-crafted essay could see you right through to researcher status.

Such a reception might have been desirable for many if not most academics in the student body, but Mika's field of study was oikodomurgy. Oikodomurges were highly valued in their precise work in building and maintaining the infrastructure of the Empire. It was a field predicated on practical learning.

Mika's master was a practical person and of the opinion that an oikodomurge without any practical experience wasn't worthy of being called a magus. He had concluded that Mika was sufficiently capable, but lacking in real-world experience. And so Mika had been cast out into the world.

"I've been traveling for the past year, but was sent out here to finish off my fieldwork," Mika said. "Oikodomurges are always in demand, you see. People want to snatch us up as quick as they can."

"Uh-huh, I see," Erich replied. "So naturally you came out here, because nothing's been *serviced* in donkey's years. You'll never run short of work."

"Exactly, old pal. I'm going to check in at one of the College's branch schools and get connected with the local administration."

"Huh? They have a college out here?!"

The mage, with his slick raven-colored hair, gave a half smile and nodded at his golden-haired friend.

"They do, but it seems like it attracts quite a...*unique*...crowd. They're not quite so obvious in their work, so it's no surprise you haven't heard of them. There are many willing volunteers for their clinical trials out here in the countryside. I don't need to tell you why, do I?"

At the words "clinical trials," a jenkin adventurer from the local area chose to speak up. "Rumors go around that they're a dream come true. They won't just fix you up free of charge, whatever you've got; they *pay you* for your trouble! But I also hear you ain't guaranteed to get better. Means you can't complain if things go wrong, which sometimes they do..."

"Now that doesn't sound good," Erich said.

"Not good at all," Mika agreed. He sighed. The adventurers present thought that the mage was awfully close to their boss, but, hold on, now he was leaning his head on his shoulder? Despite being the taller one, he looked awfully content in spite of how uncomfortable the pose seemed.

Goldilocks paid zero heed to the murmuration around him and stroked his friend's head to cheer him up. Mika's master really did think highly of him, but the young mage suspected this admiration manifested in the form of a mind-bogglingly massive, ceaseless stream of coursework. In the past, Mika had never hesitated to seek Erich's comfort when it got a bit too much to bear; plainly this hadn't changed as they grew closer to adulthood. Rather, Mika felt that it might have gotten worse as his time as a student was long with expectations and difficult work pushed on him.

Even Mika, who was as sweet as honey wine, had few people whom he could completely off-load onto. Ever since he started changing his sex, he noticed that more and more people buzzed around him, drawn in by the sweet scent that came with his blossoming adulthood. Mika wasn't so stupid he couldn't tell that

most of the interest in him came from chasers, thrill seekers, people who saw his body as a novelty to be consumed. It was so easy to see in their eyes—the mage had seen enough of people leering at him due to his looks, his cadre, his potential, and he was tired of it.

He was older now and could receive such provocations in an upright gentlemanly or ladylike manner as necessary. But over the years, he still hadn't managed to make a friend who he could truly trust. The one person whom he could air his worries to was far away. He received letters on occasion, but these were the only insights into what he was actually doing. While his dearest friend was out chasing his dream of being an adventurer, Mika had bottled up his complaints and his fears inside.

There were others in this world that he trusted. But his parents, with whom he could complain without care or fear of judgment, were far away in the snowy north. Mika loved his master, but the shape of their relationship was different; any thaumaturgical complaints were fine, but anything personal seemed to be off the table. He had a sibling disciple, but they were far too busy with their own bureaucratic work. Finally, there was Elisa, younger sister of his dear friend, and their friend Celia, a woman of the cloth, but Mika felt something stopping him from opening up to them too.

The breath he had been holding for years seemed to finally come out now that he was with Erich. Mika slumped onto Erich like a deflated balloon. He felt he could fall into a wonderful sleep right there and then.

"The amenities of Marsheim are still underdeveloped, but I need to research them and write up a practical assessment," Mika said. "Only then will I finally earn my position."

"Another heavy labor on your plate, old chum," Erich said.

"It is. I'm sure I don't need to tell you—you live here, after all—but the situation's pretty dire. There are just so many things that the local oikodomurges should have done...but didn't. I suppose there are just too few of them for a city of this size."

While Yorgos had darted around Marsheim to take in the sights like the curious country mouse that he was, Mika had made his own personal evaluations. The main thoroughfare of Marsheim was

missing paving stones here and there. Where they were laid, there were often bumps and potholes—hell on anyone in a carriage. Many side streets left the bare earth underneath exposed, and it was easy to imagine the roads leading to the city walls turning into a muddy mess during the rain.

Marsheim might have been at the Empire's periphery, but it was still the regional capital. How could it have gotten so bad?

Magia were a bureaucratically inclined bunch, and so they were dispatched around the Empire at the government's decree. These decisions had to contend with the opinions of the Imperial house, important regional leaders, the privy council, and the will of the people. A feudal lord only had so much individual sway, even for Marsheim, who was a Baden, an offshoot of the Imperial house, and a margrave to boot.

Of course, many students could only study at the College thanks to the support of their feudal lord or magistrate, and as such many returned to their homes to give back to their community. However, the peripheries of the Empire simply lacked the financial power to send people in the first place. In the event that they did manage to send someone, then the student in question was well within their rights to change their specialty—due to personal recourse or due to individual talents—and so many regions, like Marsheim, ended up without a sufficient force of oikodomurges.

The margrave went to great pains to preserve what little infrastructure Marsheim had. The sewage system worked; there was a street system despite its wear and tear; a portion of the budget was always spared to make sure the city walls were continually fixed and reinforced. However, it was clear that they had only the bare minimum to spare for it. The current oikodomurges in the city's employ were limited by their own mana reserves, and so only had the wherewithal to focus on *maintaining* the current infrastructure, unable to spend any energy elsewhere. They deserved high praise for managing to keep the sewers as clean and well-run as they were with only their current manpower.

An oikodomurge's work often went unseen and couldn't be imitated by your average run-of-the-mill mage. The maintenance of

infrastructure couldn’t be fobbed off onto the lay mages under the feudal lord’s direct employ. It was a difficult job that demanded steep compensation. The trouble was that Ende Erde had no shortage of public money pits: from preserving public safety, to sustaining a standing army ready for deployment or a defensive battle at a moment’s notice, to negotiating with unofficial military forces that even those in power couldn’t commission easily, all the way to keeping the old local lords content to keep their unrest at a low rumble. How much more room in the budget could there have been if Marsheim didn’t have its role to play as the Empire’s last true stronghold in the reach?

Ages of shuffling the details of the finance sheets to make the most of every last assarii had bought Marsheim a tumbledown city with crumbling streets.

All that said, it made for the perfect place for an up-and-coming oikodomurge to show off their skills and maybe even try something new.

“Ahh... My head hurts. What will they make me do, I wonder?” Mika said.

“You do have a hard time of it, old chum. If I can be of aid to you, say anything and it shall be done,” Erich replied.

“Anything...huh...”

“Merely say the word,” Erich said as he tenderly stroked the cheek of his dear friend. Mika chuckled.

“You’re a good man. You shouldn’t say such things so easily.” He stroked the back of Erich’s hand with his own thumb. “Well, I’ll be doing more than my fair share of traveling up and down the canton, I suspect; maybe I’ll hire you as my private bodyguard.”

“Of course! I’ll cut you a good deal.”

“Don’t worry about that. I’ve got my government stipend. Crank up your prices as much as you wish.”

At these words, the Fellows started to speak up once more.

“Ahh, I’m jealous of ya, Boss. Share some of the pie with us too!” and so on went the bantering cries.

“Fine, fine,” Mika chuckled. “If Erich’s not enough, I’ll gladly welcome more help.”

The mage then paused as if something had caught his eye. Yorgos had been strangely quiet. He looked over at the ogre...and saw he was wearing a ghastly expression.

"Oh no! Yorgos! Are you all right?!" Mika exclaimed, before the Fellows fell into chaos.

"Whoa! His face's gone dark as coals! What does that mean?!"

"Hell if I know! I'd never met an ogre before this guy. Right, let's get him outta here."

"Someone get some water from the cold baths!"

"He's not warmed up, he's practically overheating..."

"Holy crap... I can't lift him up!"

"Go get something to lever him out with, idiot! Or get a Fellow with some *paws* on 'em to help!"

Most of the adventurers had been quiet as they listened to Erich and Mika talk, so no one had noticed that Yorgos had been *especially* quiet. Not only that, Yorgos's commitment to manners had meant that he had soldiered on in silence way past his limits. Everyone present worked together to hoist the dazed ogre—a task made difficult not only thanks to his weight but also because of the fact that the metals in his skin had absorbed the heat of the steam room—and managed to drag him out to the open area.

The event ended without any injury, but everyone realized something then: When on an adventure with Yorgos, you could *never* take his word for how he was doing.

[Tips] Male ogres are resilient. This most likely comes from their servile roles within their tribes, but unfortunately they can overdo it without realizing on occasion.

When Yorgos came to, he found himself lying on the floor.

"You're awake! Thank goodness."

What he saw first was his handsome former traveling companion. He rose, spluttering, to find that he had been resting on Mika's lap.

"I-I'm so sorry, Professor! I probably weighed a ton!"

"Pay it no heed," Mika replied. "I should apologize for making you stay in there at my preferred temperature. How do you feel?"

Yorgos patted at his body but found nothing out of the ordinary. He saw that his feet had been placed into buckets of ice water and that cool rags had been placed over his nether regions, under his armpits, on his neck, and over his forehead. By cooling areas with wide veins, you could work someone down from a high temperature relatively quickly and safely. Goldilocks was familiar with the technique, and so gave instructions while the raven-haired mage produced the ice. It had taken less than half an hour for Yorgos's body temperature to regulate itself once more.

Yorgos was hugely impressed that Goldilocks knew of such a technique. He was a tough character and knew of a few emergency measures for the battlefield, but it took a lot of life experience to have this skill under one's belt.

"You don't have a headache, do you? Don't feel sick? Dizzy? Too hot?"

"I'm okay. Feel a lot better."

"Wonderful. Drink this just in case. As much as you like. Slowly, mind!"

Yorgos took the cup from Mika. It was filled with a mixture of lemon juice and water. He nodded his head in thanks. The mage must have chilled the drink; it was cool to the touch. It made Yorgos feel like a noble. As he took the first sip, a rush of embarrassment came over him. Not only had he been a burden for this great and lauded magician, but he had been lying on his soft lap. And to top it off, a cloth had been wrapped over his own lap, something that was embarrassing even though there weren't any women present. The blood rushed to his head, and he felt faint once more with the embarrassment of it all.

If there was a dagger nearby, Yorgos wouldn't hesitate to cut his own throat in penance for the hassle he had caused. However, his body had followed Mika's command and he sipped the water. The water felt incredibly delicious on his parched throat and tongue, but that only served to deepen his guilt.

"Look at them go," Mika said.

The mage, on the other hand, looked as if he didn't mind in the slightest. He had his hand upon his hair, rippling in the breeze that

came through the bathhouse, as he looked upon the open area. Bathhouses in the Trialist Empire of Rhine often had a small open-air yard where visitors could do light exercise. Out on the grass, the adventurers were engaging in some sparring. After they realized that their newest member wasn't in any immediate danger, they decided to work up even more of a sweat.

The audhumbla had decided he would get one over on the werewolf for revealing such an embarrassing episode from his past, and so the pair were now engaged in a scuffle, taking each other head-on. Elsewhere a few other pairings of similar heights were also wrestling. Their hands were locked, but no one was throwing any punches. When you had cause to expect that everyone on the battlefield would be armored, there wasn't much point relying on your right hook. If you punched someone's breastplate, helmet, or even mail, you would only end up hurting yourself—even if you had hand protection.

"Whoa!"

A tough-looking mensch, better described as a stone pillar with arms and legs, crumpled as Goldilocks tackled him with laser precision. A deft arm under his armpit and a sweep of the legs set up Goldilocks's partner to say an expeditious hello to the ground. If they had been wearing armor, he would've been crushed by the weight of his opponent and his own armor, but luckily he got off fine this time. Goldilocks struck him near his armpit with a pointed hand, as if performing the felling blow with a bladed weapon, and the match was over. In a real bout, his hand would've been a dagger which would've slipped between the cracks of his armor to piece the heart.

"What's wrong?! Is this all you've got? Who's next?!" Erich roared.

"All right, I'll take you on!"

Goldilocks left the first partner on the ground. The fellow was making an odd, strangled sort of sound—he had fallen in a way to soften the blow, but apparently it was quite the crash landing. Erich squared up to take on his next brave challenger—a goblin this time.

The air was tense, but there was no bloodlust.

"Do you feel able to sit up now?" Mika asked.

The ogre snapped back to his senses at the mage's words. He felt a flush of embarrassment at being looked at with the same gaze a mother would regard her child with, and gave a small nod.

[Tips] People of all types, not just adventurers, like to test their martial might in the bathhouse garden. You sometimes find regular folk wanting to test their skills against someone a bit more well-versed in combat.

Yorgos sunk into the pleasantly warm bathtub, and his thoughts drifted to the soft sensation that still tickled the back of his head.

Over the course of his short life—although he was developmentally ahead of any mensch of the same physical age—Yorgos had hardly ever laid his head in someone's lap before. In ogre society, one didn't necessarily show feelings of friendship to one's juniors through physical touch.

Ogre children can walk one month after birth and stop suckling at an early age. If a boy, the mother loses interest in him at an alarming rate. If the child is a girl, then she is raised into a warrior. Love toward these daughters is shown through training that barely leaves them alive—something absolutely absurd from most other races' perspectives.

Yorgos had rested upon a man's lap from time to time. His father was a gentle and quiet type, and so they'd enjoyed naps together during his time off. Later in life, he had fallen unconscious during a battle, and a fellow support soldier had allowed him to rest upon his lap until he awoke.

However, even taking differences of species into account, could another man's lap be *that* soft?

"Hey, newbie. Doin' okay? Not overheatin' again?"

The mindful call from Etan, who was also enjoying a soak, brought Yorgos back to reality.

They were in one of the warmer baths. Some of the other adventurers had hopped out to have another round in the steam room now that they'd warmed up again, and the rest had decided once had been enough. The Fellows were fully aware that they

didn’t always have to move as a single unit, and this applied in the baths as much as anywhere else.

Yorgos replied that he was fine, but the audhumbla didn’t look so sure. It wasn’t too surprising. If someone collapsed with no warning once, it could happen again. It was a lesson that although Yorgos had tough enough skin to fend off most sword slashes, he wasn’t completely invincible on the inside.

Slightly uncomfortable at being fussed over, Yorgos asked Etan a question to take his mind off things: What kind of clan was the Fellowship of the Blade?

The Fellowship had been sung about in stories, but these were heroic tales of might and valor. Although they traced reality in describing young adventurers who had gathered together under a talented swordsman, they did not have the extraneous details for wannabe members that a normal recruitment drive might convey.

During his travels to Marsheim, Yorgos had asked the adventurers that had occasionally accompanied the caravans what a “clan” was. They had told the aspiring adventurer that clans were organizations where you would pay an entry fee and continuous membership fee, and in return you could borrow the might of the clan and share intel. However, when he reiterated this understanding, Etan merely laughed.

“The Fellowship ain’t quite the kinda clan you know,” he said.

“Huh? It’s not?”

“You betcha. Y’see, it’s different from how other clans work here in Marsheim. We’re just a buncha strays who look up to Goldilocks and like the thrill of the fight. We use our skills to pay our way forward.”

The audhumbla’s explanation was quite simple. What Yorgos found out was that Goldilocks hated the preexisting clans of Marsheim, content as they were to suck their new recruits dry. He had no aspirations of getting rich and parading around with a swarm of underlings who served him. However, when young adventurers had come up to him of their own accord, his good conscience couldn’t very well drive them away. After much thought, Goldilocks had decided to form a clan that would run by its own ruleset.

The Fellowship of the Blade did not take an entry fee, and neither did it take a regular membership fee. At its core, it was merely a group of like-minded people who gathered under Goldilocks and received his tutelage while doing jobs efficiently. Now, that wasn't to say that they were unorganized rabble. Official members had a clasp with the clan logo—that of a wolf with a sword in its jaws—and went into battle in matching armor. Not only that, they were bound together by the clan's rules.

Goldilocks had given his reasoning as to why he decided on this different approach: What was the point of skimming aspiring adventurers' money when they had come from the countryside without any money to begin with? Did the people who did such things really find any joy in the food and booze that money bought?

Through this, Goldilocks denied himself the expected rights that other clan leaders felt were theirs. In return, he did not allow anyone under him to feed on those who were even weaker.

Although the Fellowship of the Blade might not have seemed all too strange in isolation, it was a fact of life that it worked very differently from the other clans that existed.

"Wait... So we don't need to give *anything* to the boss?" Yorgos asked.

"Pretty much," Etan replied. "At this point it'd be weird for him to hoard cash. If anything, the boss already earns enough to do what he wants without taking a cut from us."

To Yorgos, it did and did not make sense in equal measure.

Even in the songs, Goldilocks earned a fortune. The bounty he had won from bringing in the Infernal Knight, Jonas Baltlinden, had earned him at least one hundred drachmae—some songs exaggerated and said he had earned *three hundred*—and with the extra bounties for Baltlinden's underlings, he had earned more than enough to buy himself ample farmland if he wanted. Not only that, Goldilocks was blessed—or *cursed*—with run-ins with bandits, and so his coffers were only a trip out of town away from a new payday. They didn't run quite as much as the Infernal Knight, but rounding up a bunch of the big-name bandits from Ende Erde could earn ten or twenty gold pieces.

From the way that Goldilocks readily paid for food and baths for his Fellows, Goldilocks clearly split his earnings with his party and the other people—the caravans, hired adventurers, and bodyguards—on his adventures. He wouldn't have come to be called Erich the Charitable otherwise.

Despite it all, it was obvious that Goldilocks must have amassed enough gold that a regular citizen would take multiple lifetimes to earn the same. His way of life didn't make much sense to the ever-prudent Yorgos. People were creatures driven by greed. You could *never* have enough money. It wasn't rare to see people carry on with dirty business long after they'd already accumulated more money than they could spend in a lifetime.

How could Goldilocks act as if he simply didn't need money?

"I dunno," Etan said. "I think he's just someone who ain't interested in hoardin' money. Or maybe he kinda just views it as a useful *tool*. It's not as if he gives everything away; it's more that he views it as something you can give up in return for something with actual value."

"Something with *actual* value...?"

"Yeah. Not just *things*, mind. You can buy relationships and even trust with money. I've only been swingin' my sword by his side for a year or so, but I can tell he's a clever guy. Ain't no way I can even imagine the kinda stuff that goes on inside his head."

When Etan went on to tell Yorgos about the rumors about how Goldilocks had once served a noble in the capital, the ogre didn't find it difficult to believe. After all, Mika had come from the capital, so that must have been where they met.

"We're the Fellowship of the *Blade*, but that ain't the only thing he teaches us," Etan went on. "Gives us good advice on how to get through gigs, how to set up camp, and how to buy in bulk for cheap, and how to make lotsa food that lasts a good long while. Remember the yard back in the Silverwolf? We don't just train out there, we also smoke meat and stuff. It gets real lively!"

As Etan explained, the Fellowship of the Blade was more than just a place to learn how to fight. It was a place where you could learn all the fundamentals of being an adventurer.

Camping was something that seemed easy in concept, but was difficult in execution. You needed to learn and get used to a lot: sleeping without feeling exhausted upon waking up; cooking well; setting up and packing down quickly. Even if you were the sort of person who had spent their youth running around in the fields, it was surprisingly difficult to spend a night under the stars and wake up the next day feeling ready to work.

The same went for taking on jobs and doing them well. Many adventurers found themselves getting injured without realizing it. Goldilocks taught his Fellows how to avoid such tragedies.

"But there are rules," Etan said. "They ain't too tricky, though."

Organizations, by their nature as things of many parts, had many points of failure. The Fellowship needed a set of rules to make sure everyone, including the group's potential outliers, were on the same page. The core of the Fellowship's code of conduct was protected by all Fellows, from candidates to officially acknowledged members alike, and obeyed more rigidly than one might follow the dictates of one's parents.

Even if Goldilocks did not choose to run the Fellowship like other clans, he had one fear. It didn't matter how he viewed or defined the Fellowship; there would be those who would try to use his name for selfish and untoward purposes. In order to prevent this and to protect the good name of himself and his clan, Goldilocks had decided upon what the Fellows called the three oaths.

Goldilocks didn't mind if you were proud of your clan. He didn't even mind if you used it to prove yourself when selling your services. There was nothing wrong in feeling pride for the organization that you worked with. The problem was with one's ego. If the Fellows began to use the Fellowship to serve their own private purposes, then the Fellowship as a whole would change beyond recognition. Since the day Goldilocks had announced the tenets, none had broken a single one of them. That included Goldilocks himself.

"I'll teach you them, so try and keep 'em in mind, okay? The boss hates dishonest folks more than anything else in the world. Well, maybe after cockroaches."

"Right..."

"Lessee... There've been about five people who got kicked out of the Fellowship. Three of 'em I can talk about like I know anything; there was a dumbass who could never quite square his view of things with ours, an ass who wanted to piggyback on our glory from the start, and a fool who just didn't have any self-control. The boss completely flipped his lid over all of them. Scared the hell out of me. I never wanna see anything like it again."

The audhumbla shivered despite the hot water, the memories of the event playing in his head. Yorgos could tell from Etan's pallor that he would *not* appreciate more detail.

The ogre couldn't imagine what that mild-mannered and gentle-looking mensch would look like when he was truly mad, but Yorgos knew that Erich was someone important and as such worth fearing. It must have been truly terrifying. Maybe they were right when they said that ignorance was bliss.

Etan shook off the bloodcurdling memories and began to relate the general rules of the Fellowship to Yorgos. Apart from the three core tenets, the rules weren't all too demanding: keep clean and hygienic, preserve your pride and self-respect as an adventurer, value honesty. They were all more ways of viewing oneself than actual behavioral prescriptions. However, Goldilocks had warned not to take them too lightly—it was surprisingly difficult to keep up these important fundamentals.

"Heh, saying them now, the rules seem pretty damn simple," Etan said. "In the Fellowship we don't got sneaky types, rude folk who wanna play gangster, or even the threatenin' types of heroes that the common folk don't like. It's simple: If you want to become an adventurer to be like a hero you admire, then you gotta start by actin' like them."

"Um... Sorry, but I dunno much about stuff around here," Yorgos said.

"Oh yeah. Where were you born again?"

"Between some of the city-states by the Southern Sea. Are heroes not viewed well around here...?"

Etan gave a list of the names heroes had come by in Marsheim: gangsters, lowlifes, thugs. If you boiled down an adventurer to their

essence, they were nothing more than an unemployed vagabond with a weapon on their waist who chose violence as a lifestyle.

"They're not too far wrong, eh? At the heart of it, we're just rootless idiots who chose to chase dreams instead of gettin' an upright job. It ain't no surprise that the world at large doesn't take well to us."

"Huh... Guess it's the same wherever you go."

"Whether they call us worthless layabouts or two-bit thugs, the truth is there *were* heroes of the kinds in the stories. We gotta put the fire under our dreams and make them reality!" Etan said, before scratching his nose and adding with a bashful laugh, "Well, that's somethin' the boss taught me."

Yorgos thought back to the question Mika had asked him in the yard. He felt he could now answer it with confidence. Under Goldilocks, he could become a great warrior.

"All right!" Yorgos said.

"Hm? What's gotten into ya, newbie?"

"I got something I need to say."

Yorgos had noticed that Erich had just emerged from the steam room and so raised himself out of the bath and walked toward him with big steps.

"Boss?"

"Hey, Yorgos. What's up?" Erich said with a collected smile. He placed a hand on his hip and held his chest high. It was almost a wordless invitation for Yorgos to say exactly what he wanted to say.

"First tenet of the Fellowship of the Blade!" Yorgos announced. "Ever enjoyable, ever heroic."

A few civilian visitors flinched in surprise at this sudden exclamation, but the Fellows gave an altogether different reaction. Those in the baths stood up, those resting got to their feet, those in the yard stopping wrestling and stood at attention.

"Ever enjoyable, ever heroic!" came the resounding response.

"Second tenet! Show your might through your own merit."

"Show your might through your own merit!"

"Third tenet! Cast no shame upon your blade."

"Cast no shame upon your blade!"

In the ancient Southern Sea, only the most important oaths were announced in a completely exposed, unfettered state like this.

Yorgos had taken in the three tenets, digested them, and had resolved to follow through with them. As he pledged to each one, he fell to one knee before a mensch who was far smaller than him.

"I have taken on each tenet, Boss," Yorgos said. "I ask of you...please allow me to join the Fellowship of the Blade!"

"Oh yeah, Dietrich's sudden arrival cut you off, huh..." Goldilocks said with a smile at the memory of the zentaur. He placed a hand on Yorgos's shoulder before helping the new recruit up.

"Allow me the pleasure of formally saying this: we welcome you, new Fellow!"

"Thank you!"

"All right, time for your first job."

"Anything!"

"What sort of Fellow frightens other respectable visitors to the baths in the middle of the day like this?! Go apologize to everyone, right now!"

Goldilocks gave the ogre a joking smack which resounded with a satisfying clang. Yorgos looked around and saw that a group of curious onlookers had come to see what the fuss was about.

[Tips] The Fellowship of the Blade is a clan led by Goldilocks Erich that functions somewhat differently from the other clans of Marsheim. It is a group where members and leaders alike help one another. "Fellows" undergo training with the sword and receive other education under the clan leaders. Parties form depending on the demands of the job and head out to work together. They sometimes receive larger jobs, such as protecting caravans, led by Goldilocks and his followers.

With a number of Fellows joining out of admiration for Goldilocks as opposed to a desire to become skilled practitioners of the blade, the clan is not entirely sworn to the sword specifically.

By the time the events of that afternoon had wrapped up—a day that was surely to go down in history alongside Etan's comments that Goldilocks should be a weaver or Mathieu's deriding his scrawny mensch build—the sun was low in the sky.

The adventurers had spent a long time in the baths, but lengthy stays in the bathhouse were more than common in the Empire. It wasn't just about enjoying a nice soak; Rhinians liked to drink water, eat some light food, and take short breaks between rounds in the actual baths. The hot water and steam allowed the stress to melt away; enjoying oneself without being concerned about the time was a luxury that the bathhouse offered.

"That was a wonderful dip. A bath truly is a salve for the soul," Mika said.

"There's a certain romance to the rustic way of cleaning yourself when out on the road, but the baths really are incomparable," Erich agreed.

The two friends stretched their refreshed and clean bodies as they walked. The adventurers who walked behind were still pondering the depths of the pair's friendship as memories of the baths came bubbling back.

"Dietrich," Erich said.

"Yesh?!"

Among them was one person who looked downright depressed. It was the zentaur. Despite the prospect of a party and booze, she was walking with positively heavy hoofsteps. Erich gave her a concerned look.

"What's wrong? You look like someone shoved you into an icehouse instead of a nice hot bath."

"N-Nothing! Nothing at all!"

Erich looked at some of the female adventurers who had been in the bath with Dietrich to suss out what had happened, but all of them avoided his gaze. The atmosphere seemed to suggest that they were doing this for Dietrich's sake. Their silent faces didn't seem to indicate that Dietrich had done anything wrong this time, so Erich decided to respect their reticence. It was probably nothing too major; something that shouldn't be spoken about in front of so

many people.

"All right then," Erich said. "When we're back, don't hesitate to have a drink. A mug of something strong tastes best after a joyful reunion, after all. Oh yeah, Yorgos? Have you got a place to stay yet?"

The ogre was gradually finding his own rhythm within the Fellowship. Goldilocks's question caused him to remember that he hadn't organized anywhere to live. He had stored his belongings at the Snowy Silverwolf, but he hadn't made any arrangements to stay there or anywhere for that matter.

"Your expression tells all. I recommend you stay at the Snowy Silverwolf. They do a lot for us there. You can stay in one of the dorm rooms for three assarii per night. Ah, maybe you'd prefer a private room. That'll be eight assarii or so."

The Snowy Silverwolf was famed as a friendly tavern for fledgling adventurers, and ever since the Fellowship had set up their home base there, they had started to cut good deals for the Fellows who stayed—at the cost of the occasional hand with chores around the shop.

"But I'm not sure if it's the right place for you, Mika."

"Hey now, old pal," Mika said. "Have you forgotten those days sleeping together with naught but the grass as our beds and stones as our pillows? I don't care for a tavern's status. In fact, I'd prefer somewhere less fancy."

"I doubt your fellow lodgers would be able to relax with you around, *mein ehrenwerter Professor*."

"Enough teasing, *mein berühmter Goldschopf-Aster Freund*."

Only Erich and Mika understood the rapport they had between them as they laughed and jabbed at each other's sides. All the same, the Fellows felt that Goldilocks had a point when it came to the issue of the mage's potential residence. The Snowy Silverwolf was the perfect environment for rowdy adventurers, but it wasn't the sort of place where a well-to-do mage ought to spend the night. Indeed, to be frank, the adventurers felt they couldn't relax and just be themselves with someone so important under the same roof. Mika wasn't a noble, and they had just been in the baths together, so they

knew in their heads that they wouldn't be told off for being uncouth, but they didn't want to be observed with a judgmental eye if they said or did something stupid.

"Listen, Mika, why don't you come stay at the inn I use? There are good rooms there."

"Oh? You don't stay at the Snowy Silverwolf?" Mika asked.

"Of course not. They support up-and-coming adventurers. If I stayed there and took a whole room for myself, then that would mean one less newbie could stay there."

Goldilocks stayed at an inn that only a few of his most trusted knew. His reasoning about taking a new adventurer's space was true, but he also mentioned that an old acquaintance had allowed him to stay, to which everyone nodded in understanding.

As the group walked down the street, awash in a gentle hearth-like twilight glow, the Snowy Silverwolf soon came into view. All that was left was to enjoy the party. Inside were adventurers and other regulars, eager to enjoy some free food and drink.

That wasn't quite right. They weren't the only ones watching and waiting. Under the scarlet light of the city at dusk stood a young man with his feet spread wide and his arms crossed. He stood resolute and unwavering, but not terribly tall. He would have made a good sparring partner for Goldilocks, in fact. He must have just returned from a gig; he was wearing dirty traveling gear and a packed-away sword at his waist. He had wild and unruly black hair, and a fierce and discontented look in his narrowed eyes. The scar that stretched across his right cheek was twisted in displeasure alongside his pursed lips.

"You took your damn time! How long's a damn bath supposed to take?!"

Yorgos knew who this man was in an instant. Comparing him to Goldilocks, the answer came easily. The man had black hair, eyes that burned with ambition, and an unmistakable scar across his face —the mark of an early adventure.

Goldilocks Erich's comrade, the man lauded as Siegfried the Lucky, was waiting outside the Snowy Silverwolf.

[Tips] Most urban Rhinians spend two to three hours in the bathhouse.

A hero's tale does not stand on the merits of the hero alone. It is populated by a whole cast of characters: from the tyrannical villain who needs defeating, the beautiful princess waiting to be saved, and the many people who support the leading role. A particularly popular figure in these stories is the comic relief.

Siegfried the Lucky—also known as Siegfried the Hapless—was an adventurer who featured in many of the tales of Goldilocks as Erich's irreplaceable comrade. For the poets who penned these tales, he was the perfect vehicle for a few good goofs.

"Hey, Siegfried! I didn't realize you were back," Erich called to the sullen-faced adventurer in front of the tavern. He dashed toward his comrade, ready to put his arm around his shoulders, when Siegfried suddenly grabbed Erich's lapel.

"What did you *mean* that this was going to be an 'easy recon mission'?! Do you wanna know what sweet hell I've been through?!"

The Fellows behind Erich greeted their second-in-command with a chorus of "Welcome back!" "Good work out there!" and "It's Big Bro Dee!" However, Siegfried was in no mood to banter with them—not even giving them the expected response of "Call me Siegfried!"—choosing instead to press on with his tirade against Erich.

An outside observer, deprived of any context, would be forgiven for thinking that it looked like something out of a bar fight. Erich, as ever, received his comrade with a cool smile.

"All right, all right," he said. "Tell me the whole thing over a cup of something strong. Are Kaya and the other Fellows with you?"

"They've crashed out in their beds! I'm barely keepin' myself standing right now. If you knew this whole time how bad it was going to go, I'll hang you myself."

"Come now, Sieg. Have I ever given you a job just to make your life miserable?"

Siegfried the Lucky took a moment to think back on their shared history, evidently drawing a blank, because a look of utter disgust

and resignation crept across his face. As he looked back on his work history with a cooler head, he recalled that Erich had always carefully weighed the work they'd taken on so as never to put Siegfried fully out of his depth—even if Siegfried still felt like he hadn't been told the whole truth—all in the name of pulling in a bigger paycheck for everyone. Sometimes Siegfried wondered if Erich was somehow steering events from behind the scenes just to keep lucrative crises coming their way.

This past job had been the worst he'd taken in the whole past season.

"But, c'mon man!" Siegfried went on, his face red with an anger that now had no outlet. "We looked into thirty damn roadhouses and found filthy crooks in over half of 'em! I went three nights straight not getting a wink of sleep!"

Siegfried's mission had taken him and his team to a number of roadhouses, placed at strategic rest stops through this part of the Empire, to review their compliance with the Empire's strict standards of conduct. While they served much the same purpose as travelers' towns—the term of art for cantons whose local economies hinged upon their trade with and support of caravans and merchants—in that they sustained and extended the flow of goods throughout the nation by providing a secure place to rest and restock along the key trade routes, each roadhouse received generous annual funding from the government to remain in service.

The Empire's western reach was a place of unrest and potential rebellion. Many of the roadhouses throughout the area maintained a stable of fast horses, raised at the Empire's expense, so that Imperial-aligned local lords could swiftly convey news of any sudden revolting developments in their sphere of influence. Unfortunately, although these inns existed along Imperial trade routes, that didn't mean that every location was particularly amenable to human existence. Many of the roadhouses were situated in places that refused natural settlements thanks to arid climes, rough terrain, or impoverished soil. It wasn't a leap of the imagination to see that many of these inns weren't run completely aboveboard.

It didn't take long for these inns to break down into dens of

immorality. The desperate conditions imposed by the environments in which they sprang up forced their long-term residents into the austere logic of banditry—"Why make something when I can buy it? Wait, why buy anything when I can steal it?" Erich lived in an era where few people noticed if one or two travelers went missing on the roads. Just as water settles at the lowest point, these roadhouses reliably became hunting grounds for their stewards, where travelers, rootless merchants, and even mercenaries and adventurers were prey first and customers a distant second.

The government was fully aware that the economic arteries of the Empire would run still and dry if travelers and merchants couldn't trust the roadhouses. It wasn't just a matter of trade either. An unscrupulous owner would see the fine horses tied to their establishment, already bought and paid for with Imperial tax dollars, as lucrative assets to sell off to the highest bidder—less sympathetic local strongmen, more often than not—and replace them with old nags and glue factory candidates, sorely weakening the Empire's war footing to line their own pockets.

Naturally, the roadhouses could not be allowed to go without regular external review and discipline as necessary. Naturally, it wouldn't make any sense for a government official to go in announcing their affiliation—it would only drive the venue subject to inspection to play at shaping up its act until the bureaucrat had left. Naturally, the best candidate for the job was an adventurer—someone who could come unannounced, move without arousing suspicion, and protect themselves should the need arise.

Siegfried's job had been to travel with his team in the guise of ordinary vagabonds, stay at the assigned roadhouses and write up reports on the facilities available, as well as the quality of the lodging. At least, that was how it was meant to go. As Siegfried had just complained, over *half* of the roadhouses they were dispatched to had already fallen into outright larceny. Not a day went by without attacks in the night and random assaults. Just as they moved on to the next inn, hoping that *this time* they would get a decent night's sleep, the situation would repeat like clockwork.

If that wasn't bad enough, they had involved a whole traveler's

town when one particular roadhouse—stuffed to the rafters with pilfered Imperial merchandise—decided that a few more dead adventurers wouldn't make much of a difference and attacked Siegfried's group outright. A massive brawl ensued, and the idiotic perpetrators were to the last felled or strung up and left ready to be handed in to the authorities. The job was supposed to be a good old-fashioned milk run and had been anything but from day one.

Indeed, it was a perfect example of Siegfried's perfectly ambivalent luck.

Siegfried's luck was undeniably bad, in that of all the people in the world to be strung along by the client's white lies into the center of this wicked web of schemes, it had to be him and his team. And yet he'd also had the undeniable good fortune to have emerged from the whole hellish scenario in one piece where a hundred other more ordinary folk would have perished. The job would have ground dozens of more run-of-the-mill adventurers to a fine paste.

Siegfried had begun to attract clients for gigs *independent* of Goldilocks, and at the time he'd prayed that in the man's absence, he might be dealt a fairer hand. The god fit to answer such a prayer, however, had plainly not yet been invented.

"All right, I hear you," Erich said. "But calm yourself, Siegfried. You don't have a single injury worth speaking of, from what I can see. Looks like a happy result in my eyes!"

"If you call this a happy result, then we live in paradise..."

"More importantly, comrade, look," Goldilocks said, indicating a number of new faces.

Siegfried took a sudden step back as he finally took in the small group around Erich: a man whose looks could enchant any soul with a working eye and beating heart, an awkward-looking zentaur who stood far above Siegfried, and a vicious-looking ogre who could put fear in the heart of even a seasoned warrior. The hero-hopeful was no stranger to beauties and rogues, but to have a whole roster of them suddenly laid out before him was a shock. In particular, he had never seen someone of Mika's like before, to the point that he couldn't quite parse the scene at all. Siegfried was plainly out of his depth and lost as to where to begin.

"Allow me to introduce these new arrivals. The first is my old chum: a student at the Imperial College of Magic and future great professor. I'm sure you don't need me rehashing any of those old stories, eh?"

"Y-Yeah... So this is your fella in the flesh, huh?"

Siegfried had heard many tales of Goldilocks's friend in the capital, and every time had wondered if he hadn't been gilding the lily somewhat in his account. All the same, he had never expected to meet the person in question, and so he hadn't given them much thought. While he thought that it would be nice to have some more magic firepower on their side, it ticked him off that someone so perfect apparently existed in this world.

"A pleasure to meet you. You may call me Mika. And you're Siegfried the Lucky, yes? Your name precedes you! I've heard of your exploits in Erich's letters; it seems like you're as great and bold a man as he said."

Siegfried's preconceptions were actively shattering under the weight of the reality of the situation. Mika's beauty seemed to dull his very senses. Feelings that Siegfried couldn't really quite digest welled up in him as this absolute stunner—not in a gendered sense, Mika was simply *beautiful*—complimented him. Worse yet, he'd complimented Siegfried for his courage and his manly moral stature, and to hear it said so earnestly from someone so gorgeous and so much *taller* than him... Needless to say, wires were crossing in Siegfried's head that had never come near one another before.

It was clear Siegfried couldn't leave that noble-looking hand waiting forever for a handshake. He pulled himself together and was surprised at the touch of his hand. He had a tough palm, calluses at the bases of his fingers—not the kind of hand you would expect from an aspiring magus who did their work behind a desk. Now, it wasn't quite as tough as the hands of his weathered Fellows, but it colored Siegfried's internal appraisal of him. *Had Erich's ebullient praise been a plain statement of fact this whole time?*

"Next, we have a new recruit into the Fellowship," Erich said.

"M-My name is Yorgos!" the ogre said. "I-I can't believe I get to meet you, Siegfried the Lucky! I-I'm so moved. U-Um, can I shake

your hand too?!”

Without a moment to recover from Mika’s captivating presence, Siegfried looked up—his head craned back so far that his neck hurt—to lock eyes with the ogre whose own fearsome aura had, despite Siegfried’s battle-hardened ways, put a lump of dread in his throat. This ogre had an adult’s mien and a child’s joy as he held out his hand at the ready.

Siegfried was long since used to seeing adventurers who cut a fiercer figure than himself. If you ignored the smaller races, most of the Fellows—even those younger than him—were far more terrifying to look at. Something else that Siegfried had grown used to was seeing people approach him after hearing about his exploits in heroic tales, although to his chagrin, he still was yet to feature as the sole hero in any of them.

“Thanks for comin’,” Siegfried said, taking Yorgos’s hand. “You’re our first ogre. Lookin’ forward to workin’ with ya.” His head still spinning, this was about as good as Siegfried could give.

“Me too! Ohh, I can’t believe I got to meet the man famed as Goldilocks’s comrade *and* his closest friend *in the same day*. I’m so happy I came!”

“What did you say?! I ain’t his ‘closest friend’!”

However, it didn’t take long for Siegfried to fall into his usual casual self. He hated being associated with Goldilocks, whether as his best friend, sworn brethren, or even party member. Siegfried dropped Yorgos’s hand as he shouted, but all he got in return was laughter from the Fellows who had long since grown used to this behavior.

“Ahh, typical Big Bro, gettin’ all flustered.”

“Heh, it’s cute when Big Bro Dee does it though!”

“I’m more impressed that he can still keep on with that stuff after *over a year*.”

“Quit that, all of ya!” Siegfried barked in response to his Fellows’ comments. “Oh, you better *buckle down* for your next training sesh with me. Everyone who chimed in just now? I’ve got every one of your mugs committed to memory!”

It was unclear which came first, Siegfried’s rage or his audience’s

banter. In the end, both were only the natural consequences of his choice to wear his heart on his sleeve and his rapport with his Fellows.

Goldilocks shook his head as if he had no words, before placing his hand on the door of the tavern and announcing: "All right! Time to drink!"

"What about my introduction?!" Dietrich yelled, but she dropped the matter at the first whiff of opened kegs and hurried in to join the festivities.

[Tips] An adventurer's party does not always work with a fixed roster.

That evening, the lively Snowy Silverwolf was filled with adventurers and travelers, some coming for their usual repast and others for the promised celebration. In addition to the Fellows who hadn't gone to the baths (and at this point had already had their supper), folk with nothing better to do were waiting, excited for their free drinks. They must have told their friends; an even larger crowd had gathered than before.

When Goldilocks finally walked in the door, a chorus of cries came ringing out, happy at his return or frustrated at how long he had been.

"I'm sorry for making you all wait, friends," Goldilocks said. "Tonight is my treat. Come together and celebrate the arrival of my friends and a new Fellow!"

The voices around the room raised into a roar and the barmaids dashed about. Mugs of ale were passed around, accompanied by plates of wurst and cheese. These items weren't all too expensive on their own, but it added up when you considered just how many expectant mouths there were.

Goldilocks seemed to pay the size of the crowd no heed and gladly received a cup of one of his favorite whiskies. When almost everyone had a drink in their hands, Goldilocks stood up tall and looked across the room. He cast his gaze to every last corner, twisting his head to make sure he didn't miss anything, but it looked

like the person he was looking for wasn't present. The cheers from the eager crowd led him to finally give up his search. Goldilocks lifted his cup up high.

"Cheers—to our new friends who have come from afar!"

The cheering of the crowd rang out through the room, and Mika lifted up his own cup with a bashful expression. The chains *finally* undone, everyone tucked into their drinks. They didn't need to worry about their wallets. Bed was upstairs. They could relax and let the night begin. It was time to dig in and wallow in the chaos that was to come.

The Fellows spread throughout the room picked up their drinks and went over to give a proper greeting to their boss. They all politely thanked Goldilocks for the free drinks, placed a cup in front of Siegfried, and then introduced themselves to the guests of honor.

Sitting safely next to his closest friend, Mika warmly accepted each mug of ale that was given to him by each Fellow before downing each and every one. The onlookers were completely nonplussed by this newcomer's bottomless stomach, wondering just where his limits were. Everyone in the Fellowship had long since given up trying to outdrink their boss. Goldilocks far preferred whiskey to ale, and promptly drank everyone else under the table. Even a dvergr well-known for holding his liquor had balked in the face of Goldilocks's steady pace. Some of the rowdier members of the group were secretly excited to have a new challenger.

More and more drinks were placed in front of Mika as they wondered when he would finally cry uncle. The mage didn't refuse a single drink and drained each cup with a small, bewitching smile. He didn't even waste a drop, licking his lips with an alluring sweep. The cheers grew louder with each successfully drained cup until they sputtered out into whimpering groans. While it was true that ale wasn't the strongest drink, at the pace Mika was going, a regular mensch would've been flushed after five drinks and under the table after ten. Yet Mika was completely unfazed. After fifteen drinks, his cheeks had taken on a slightly pink tinge, but he was completely unperturbed. The speed of his hand delivering the drinks to his lips never wavered. He looked like he was merely quenching his thirst

with some water.

"Hey, old chum?" Goldilocks ventured. "Are you okay? Not overdoing it, are you?"

Erich looked worried as he watched Mika. From what he could remember, Mika had never been that big of a drinker. They had shared a drink a number of times, but the mage had turned bright red after the wine they shared and had gone to bed with his head still spinning. He had carried Mika to bed during that party before leaving Berylin, and they had all ended up sharing Erich's bed together. The memory came back to him as if it had only happened yesterday.

"Hm? Oh, well, yes..." the mage said as he suddenly glanced around him. Mika belonged to a race that originated in the frigid far north, where the summers were short and the winters never seemed to end. A tivisco's metabolism was tuned to break down alcohol far more quickly and efficiently than any mensch could, to ensure they could stay warm, mobile, and alert even when deep in their cups. Life in the far north simply didn't allow you to be a lightweight. Mika was no exception.

However, Erich wasn't privy to this and was genuinely concerned for his friend. While it was true that the drinks were offered to him and it would be rude to say no, it was by no means an obligation, and Erich hewed close to the principle that nothing was fun unless everyone involved was enjoying themselves. Coercion soured a good bender.

"O-Ohh... Yes, I think I'm starting to feel it," Mika said.

"Then pass that cup here, chum! I shall drink any that you cannot," Goldilocks replied.

"Hey, I'm here! I can keep going!" interjected Dietrich.

"Know your place!" Erich said.

Erich's comment stood in stark contrast to his delicate looks. A quick flick on Dietrich's nose sent her reeling back to her own empty cup.

Goldilocks then called out to the owner of the Snowy Silverwolf to prepare some water infused with lemon juice for those who wanted to sober up or avoid getting too drunk.

Mika accepted Erich's attention with an awkward smile. He had gotten so ahead of himself that he hadn't realized that he had almost revealed that he could handle his drink more than he had let on.

After introductions and the first round of drinks had been finished—a dismayingly large fraction of them having all gone to Goldilocks himself—things had calmed down around the table somewhat. Dietrich had gone off, moaning that it was hard to drink with Erich watching over her, and was soliciting drinks from the other tables. Goldilocks's favorite table seated four, leaving an empty chair in Dietrich's absence which was swiftly taken up by Yorgos, who began to match Erich's pace immediately.

"You really drink a lot. Sure surprised me," the ogre said.

"An adventurer needs to be able to hold his liquor, or so this guy says," Siegfried said. Due to the hustle and bustle of the party, he still hadn't managed to tell Erich what had happened on his last job. He held his cup close to him, a mixture that was more water than mead, as if embarrassed by how weak it was.

"There's nothing that says you're a better adventurer just because you can drink a lot," Goldilocks said. "I was merely speaking on behalf of people's expectations of you in a general sense. You don't want to accidentally sign a shady deal while you're out of it, do you?"

Yorgos watched Erich pour another cup of whiskey and carefully add a little bit of water. He took a sip as if it were the most delicious thing in the world. Despite having downed a whole round of ale and not having eaten a single bit of food, he didn't look as if anything were out of the ordinary. Even Yorgos was taken aback.

"You've been able to hold your drink ever since the old days. I need to take a leaf out of your book," the mage said. He had switched to a fruit-infused water and took a bite of some jerky. "Mm, this is good!"

"I'm glad you like it," Erich said. "I tried a whole bunch of things before I settled on our go-to trail ration recipe. That right there is a proud creation by the Fellowship. It goes well with booze, yes, but the salt content helps relieve exhaustion when out on the road. If

you simmer it, you can also make some tasty broth."

"Wow! I always knew you were good at cooking, but I didn't realize your sphere of interest was so large. It's really good. The taste persists well after I'm done, like a welcome houseguest."

Mika reached out for another mouthful of the pork jerky. It had been Goldilocks's idea to mix mashed herbs and beans with the salt to draw out a deeper flavor when smoked.

Preserved foods were not cheap or easy to make. Depending on who was making it, you might end up buying a salty, meaty lump of goop. Goldilocks realized how important it was for him and his Fellows to have their own food, since their work often demanded they march or walk off-road; an easily accessible, travel-ready supply of rations was absolutely crucial. Deciding that it would be cheaper to just make it themselves and with the knowledge that tasty food did wonders for morale, Goldilocks decided to transform an area of the yard into their food processing station. Now buying a pig with a share of everyone's money and using the blood, meat, and offal to make preserved foods had become a regular get-together for the Fellowship. The delicious smell wafting from the yard was well-known in the neighborhood.

"Isn't it just? We spent half a year of trial and error perfecting the recipe."

"You're lucky you didn't have to try the failed attempts," Siegfried grumbled. Siegfried's expression soured as his palate conjured the foul phantom flavor of the prototypes. The jerky on the table stood atop a mountain of vile failures. Of course, it would have been wasteful to throw them away, and so the members of the Fellowship had been charged with consuming them.

"Hey, I didn't force *just you* to eat them all," Erich said.

"Yeah, but you mixed your share into other dishes to mask the taste!" Siegfried replied. "C'mon, if you could do that why didn't you let us know? We were damn well about to have a riot on our hands because of that bad grub!"

Memories of meals gone awry ran deep. They could even drive a wedge between a master and their student. In a situation where the students were forced to eat slop—free or otherwise—while the

master had managed to work that same slop into something positively edible, rumblings of dissent were no surprise. Even the most impenetrable submarine could be scuttled by the influence of a few bad tinned rations. A disgruntled Fellow would be more than eager to draw their sword.

"Hey, now, I didn't want to eat it as it was..." Erich muttered.

"Do you know just how rare it is for a bastard like you to be able to cook?! Didn't you know the kitchen isn't a place for men?"

"Screw that. Who cares about who's doing something if it's done well? And, hey, I've taught you some stuff about cooking while out on the road. I'm not sure if you should force poor Kaya to—"

"Oh, shut it!"

As Siegfried started airing his own personal complaints, Erich took on his anger with an easy smile. While Erich wasn't ignoring or downplaying Siegfried's complaints, it did bring to mind an owner trying to placate an especially scrappy puppy.

It was so quick that it was impossible to spot, but Mika's lip twisted slightly at seeing his friend carouse with this other friend so heartily. Mika was an adult; he knew better than to let this emotion slip out, so he reined it in to that mere moment of displeasure. The alcohol or the joy at seeing Erich must have gone to his head—if he were still in the College, he would've been able to crush any outward signs of displeasure as easy as breathing.

Mika took a sip of water and pulled himself together. Moments of relaxation like these were the most vulnerable ones, where you faced the greatest risk of letting what you really felt show. In the hellscape of the College, where venom lurked under even the most banal of greetings, where each masked smile was a weapon, these were the exact times when such a blunder could prove most fatal.

Wishing to recalibrate, Mika picked up the empty plate and took it to the bar counter. The regular method was to call for one of the barmaids—they could often be seen around Goldilocks's table, eagerly anticipating a good tip—but Mika needed a moment away from his friend to cool his head. With silent steps, he headed to the counter, but for some reason the scruffy-bearded owner wasn't present.

"Welcome. What will you be having?" said a young-looking woman behind the counter. He wondered if she was the owner's daughter.

Mika could only see her upper body from across the counter she was leaning on. Her hair was in two chestnut bunches with black accessories. She was wearing a bare-shouldered top that girls often wore, but what caught Mika's eye was her ivy-patterned tattoo across her shoulders. Her large amber eyes were even deeper than Mika's own and seemed to possess a dangerous glow in the light. Her face should have been sweet and charming, but her smile had a hidden ferocity behind it. What drew Mika's gaze the most were her pearl-colored fangs. They were longer than a mensch's canines. These marks of a hunter glimmered as she smiled. It was a quiet and bold smile. An ensnaring smile.

"What a pretty mage you are," the girl said before Mika could ask for a refill of snacks. The mage was uneasy. His instincts screamed to him that staying here was not wise—despite the fact that she seemed like a harmless girl, despite the fact that she didn't seem to have any concealed weapon and her hands were visible. She didn't have a single catalyst on her, so why did Mika see the vision of his head flying from his shoulders if he made one wrong move?

Mika instinctively checked the simple but powerful ward that kept him safe. It was fine—he was secure. A normal arrow or dagger wouldn't so much as harm a hair on his head thanks to the barrier formed from the emergency wand stashed in the sleeve of his cloak.

"Would you like to stay here and chat with me for a while?" the girl asked.

What in the world am I doing? Mika wondered. He was out at the ends of the Empire far from any enemy he had ever made. Not only that, this was clearly an unarmed young woman who worked at the tavern. And yet, why did he have that lurking fear that his emergency measures would be necessary? Paranoid fancies spun around his head as he sat down at the counter.

[Tips] Races that cannot naturally produce magic require a catalyst to constantly maintain the barriers that will

protect them from harm.

The fancy glasses clinked as they were placed on the counter. They were at odds with an adventurer's tavern, and they reflected the glow of the bar in an enchanting way.

"Do you like a stronger drink?" the girl asked.

"Hm? Oh, I..."

"...Seems like you could drink more. In my eyes at least."

In its well-practiced palatial dialect, the girlish but alluring voice that fell from her cherry-blossom lips tickled the hairs of Mika's ear canals. It had a flowing quality that wouldn't go amiss even at the most elegant of banquets. Even the way that she uncorked the bottle and poured the amber liquid into the glass was immaculately precise. Everything about her was so at odds with her appearance that it confused Mika's brain.

From the label, Mika could tell that the alcohol was high-quality stuff. As he looked closer, he saw that there was a slip hanging from it with the name of the person it belonged to: Erich.

"He did say that tonight he would treat everyone," the girl said, replacing the lid as her devilish smile grew broader.

Mika took the drink, not even mixed with a single drop of water, and nervously brought it to his nose. The fiery alcohol stung his nostrils, bringing with it notes of oak and honey. As the fragrance vanished, it left a fruity back note. He could tell that this was fine liquor. His old pal's good taste had gone unchanged.

Slowly bringing it to his lips, he took in the most minute of sips. The heady alcohol burned his taste buds; it was hard for Mika to tell what lay behind the complex flavor. Although he enjoyed the scent, he was still too young for it to really sit well with his palate.

"It has a wonderful fragrance, but I think it's a bit early for me," Mika said. With a bit of focus, a moment later an ice cube formed and landed in his drink with a nice clink. It was a simple but valuable spell that gathered and cooled the moisture in the air.

"What a wonderful display. I imagine all the world's souses look upon you with envy."

"A little, I imagine."

The mage swirled the drink, allowing the large piece of ice to melt and sweeten the beverage. All it took was a small amount of cold water to develop the fragrance of the drink into something altogether new. As he stared at the amber beverage swirling before him, Mika remembered something that his master had told him when he came of age. His master had presented him with an expensive bottle and said: "You are like whiskey."

Whiskey originated from and was chiefly produced in distant isles, northwest of the Central Continent. For Mika it was a place closer to home than the Empire, but not a peaceful one—it was perennially beset by the northern pirates' raids.

Of all the distilled spirits, whiskey spent the longest sleeping in a cask, and when it was ready to drink, many minute changes could greatly affect its flavor: whether at room temperature, chilled, warmed slightly, served on the rocks, cut with a bit of water, or simply taken straight. There was another method that a disciple of the Wine God discovered where one would add carbonated water—however, Mika's master deemed this unorthodox to the extreme.

Mika had wondered what his master had meant when comparing him to the drink. Was he referencing the changes in temperament that came when his sex changed? The young mage wasn't even sure if it was meant to be taken as a compliment. However, with this drink before him, he felt that he could see the connection now. As he lifted the cool glass once more to his nose, he could detect the changes wrought within. The drink was weaker, but in place of the overpowering astringence came that faint scent of fruit, stronger now than before. He took another sip. It was a complex delicacy, one that could age well with him.

Looking at the bottle, it was rather full. Mika was sure that his friend felt the same way that he did: This was a drink to be enjoyed in small doses as his palate developed. The mage cracked a smile at feeling this small connection to Erich. He felt like he had won back a little of the three years they had been apart.

"It seems like it agrees with you," the girl said.

"Yes, it's a fine whiskey," Mika replied. "I'd like to have another glass in a decade or so." As the girl offered a refill, he refused,

saying that he couldn't possibly drink too much of Goldilocks's signature liquor. It would be gone in a few sips—a wasteful indulgence. He couldn't let himself become like his master, who started the night in pursuit of new wisdom and ended it muttering apologies to gods-knew-who as he pulled his blankets toward him in a drunken haze.

"Now then, dear magician, did you work in Berylin?"

"Studied, yes."

"That is rather impressive. Did you meet Goldilocks there?"

Mika nodded as he took another sip. The ice had melted further still, softening the edges of the alcohol more. If Mika were whiskey, then he felt like he had been like this drink the first time he had met Erich.

"He had come to the capital to work as a servant to a magus. We met by utter chance. We ended up working a number of times after that. We spent our leisure time together. We even ran a few experiments together." Mika paused. "I think I shared with him the most valuable thing in my life."

Mika closed his eyes and thought back. The first time he met Erich, he had been a lot younger than he was now. He'd had his sister on his back. Elisa had been a lot smaller then too. Now she was a College student, famous in her own right for her unique formulae.

The two fast friends often went on excursions riding side by side on the two horse brothers, visiting the forests at the edge of the capital to procure herbs for the job bulletin board. They had taken their first steps in learning botany and how best to pick good herbs —a lifelong skill that still allowed Mika to assemble catalysts with utmost efficiency.

Then there was that unforgettable adventure in the ichor maze, where each one's life had been left in the hands of the other. Being mere inches from death wasn't a *pleasant* memory, but it was precious nonetheless—a memory he could never abandon or allow to be tarnished. After all, that journey had given him something irreplaceable—he had learned how to instinctively use his small amount of mana effectively and come to grasp his limits, something

every magus needed to know. It was an unforgettable experience for him as a mage.

It was also an unforgettable experience for him as a person. During that moonlit night, he had hidden nothing from Erich. The memories of being seen that night made Mika flush more than the alcohol had.

"Has the drink gone to your head?" the girl asked.

"A little," Mika replied before giving drips and drops of his time in Berylin with Erich—funny stories, times when Erich had been pretty cool—while making sure to trim his stories so that he didn't go into territory that his friend wouldn't want shared. The girl's chuckles were encouraging, and so the mage found himself sharing his tales with ease. It wasn't so much that he was being egged on, so to speak; more that by retelling these memories they became more secure in his head. It was just so fun to tell of the places they'd been and the things they'd done. More than anything, Mika didn't have any friends in the capital with whom he could share his stories without fear of it somehow coming back to bite him.

Thoughts of golden-haired Elisa, who Mika viewed as his own little sister too, came into his head. She was hard at work in her own right, and tougher than before. He doubted that she was crying from being left all alone. No, maybe that was just her tough front speaking. Maybe after listening to Mika's wishes, she had rushed to Erich's old lodgings—still preserved as they were—and was wrapped up in his bedding, now faint with his smell, as she cried.

The mage reminded himself to deliver the pile of letters to Erich he'd brought along once things had calmed down a bit. Celia had written many that she had never managed to send—it seemed that immortal beings were a little worse at keeping to deadlines—and so had tasked Mika with delivering them personally. She had handed over the wad pleading with him to make sure that their friend would write a reply if he was well.

Mika filed away these thoughts for later—today the gods would forgive him for enjoying this reunion without worrying about the needs of others. His empty glass was replaced by another, which the girl filled up with the other favorite of Goldilocks's that he had been

drinking a little earlier. This one had a faint woody scent that reminded him of incense and an herby bouquet. It was a lot less severe than the other bottle. Easy to drink. Mika could see why Erich favored it.

Conjuring another piece of ice into existence, Mika enjoyed the sweet and fresh taste of this second glass. Even at his young age, he could tell that this was delicious stuff. It was like Erich to know what he could and could not do. Mika appreciated Erich's challenger's spirit, eager to test his limits and do what he had thought lay at their boundaries.

Another smile came to Mika's lips as he thought of Erich's curious lifestyle. A faint smile was a noble's most valuable weapon; it was armor that protected you far more than any poker face could. However, Mika hadn't been able to rid every trace of his emotions from this one.

"So then, young magician," the girl asked, sussing out his emotions underneath. "At the end of it all, what is Goldilocks to you?"

It was a question that cut straight to the heart of the matter.

The warmth of the alcohol rushed away in a second. It was an icy cold plunge that he couldn't replicate even if he were to return to the steam rooms of his home and jump into a river still freshly sheathed in ice. Sweat prickled on his palms; a shiver crawled down his spine. It was by will alone that he kept any sweat from breaking out on his brow. He felt his cheeks harden, but he kept up an easy smile as his brain went into overdrive.

What was that *supposed to mean?*

It seemed like an innocent question, under the circumstances. However, his instincts—the same ones that had warned him when he first settled in at the counter—told him to think this question through.

What did Goldilocks, nay, what did Erich of Konigstuhl mean to him?

It was a question that you could easily dress up with fanciful words. Yet what Mika carried in his heart defied the tidy constraints of language. Erich was the only one in the world, aside from his

parents, that saw him just as Mika—not as a tivisco, not as a College student, not as a like-minded fellow of the same sex. On that night, Mika's despair at the world had transformed into gratitude for being alive. He had been saved. There was no question about that. When Erich had told him that he valued him not only as a friend but also simply because he was Mika, he had felt for the first time in his life like he was actually alive.

Erich was precious to him, but what good was the word *precious?* He felt salvation, admiration, love—all ideas that broke down into ink on paper, tremors on a tongue, woefully insufficient to the task. Mika didn't think that even the gods could understand the weight and complexity of these emotions. But he chose his next words feeling the shadow of that knowledge hanging over him.

"He's a dear friend of mine."

Mika's unwavering heart had been forged in the heat of his own passions, tested under the weight of his own longing. And that same heart had found in Erich true friendship. A friend was easier to talk to than family, more distant than a spouse, and incomparable to any other acquaintance. There were wounds that could be salved and worries that could be shared with a friend, and no one else. In them one could find the grace to realize futures one would never dare to alone.

The feeling was born out of love, out of compassion—out of a form of sensation as old as the soul. The spell a friend's *body* might work upon you was something else, or at least something extra. Of course he didn't want to undervalue that, but it was Mika's biggest wish to always remain Erich's friend and for Erich to always remain his. The rest he hoped he could take or leave.

"And fortunately for me, he treats me like an irreplaceable friend too."

Even through the shifts in his sex, even as the years wore on, Mika would never permit his belief in Erich's commitment to him to waver. Neither would he dare hide this friendship. It was one of the few fine and shining things in this world that he was proud of. If he had to acknowledge one exception...it was when Erich made that wish of him.

"I hope that satisfies your curiosity."

Mika used what scant energy he could spare to force his face into the very same lackadaisical expression he'd maintained all night—the same smile he'd worn every time he'd inquired about the state of his grades. The girl closed her eyes and crossed her arms before falling into thought.

This was the first time that Mika pondered on something strange. He had thought that this girl had been standing atop a small platform or something as she leaned her body onto the counter. But now that she was leaning back, her posture seemed too balanced if she was standing up. To add to it, when she had reached over to the shelf behind her, it didn't seem like she was contending with a raised platform or anything...

"I'll give you a passing grade," she said with a sigh, as if this were simultaneously a big decision and also the expected outcome. "Your feelings are heavy, but also light... You don't seem interested in pursuing fame under that boy, nor do you seem like a simple old friend."

That boy? Mika puzzled, but when he looked back the girl was gone. There was no magic here—she had simply dropped down to the other side of the counter. What was strange was the fact that the counter wasn't all that tall; if she were a regular-sized girl, he should at least have been able to see her head peeking out from behind it, especially when he was sitting right up next to it. It was a mighty fine countertop with enough space for a lot of food and drink, but even so it was positively strange for her to vanish from sight.

"Where were you? I have someone I'd like to introduce you to."

"My apologies, I was helping John with a few things."

Within the learned circles of the College, thanks to the inquiries of a Setting Sun magus with a generous grasp of the workings of the human body, one not infrequently heard mention of the "party effect." It's a strange sensation where you can hear a conversation over the roaring crowd of a party. The brain unconsciously brings to the fore sounds that we would never have been able to hear otherwise.

Despite the chattering adventurers, Mika could hear not just Goldilocks, but also a by now entirely too familiar voice. Mika spun around and saw that the girl behind the counter mere seconds ago was now with Erich! It was then that he realized her beautiful and threatening amber eyes did not belong to a mensch. She was an arachne. To be specific, she was a jumping spider arachne, feared within the Empire for their prowess as scouts, hunters, and assassins.

Finally the mage's memories caught up with his thoughts as the answer revealed itself. Erich enjoyed talking about home. Mika enjoyed watching his friend talk with such joy, seeing his face sparkle as he began once again to speak in frank and glowing terms about someone he admired; a less attentive listener might have thought he was *boasting*. Her face had cropped up many a time in his stories, and her presence stirred up emotions in Mika he struggled to describe.

Margit. She was Erich's childhood friend and a talented huntress, with whom he had vowed to become an adventurer. He treasured her, and she was the one who'd given him the earring that he didn't even allow his friends to touch without warning.

Mika slapped himself inwardly. How had he not noticed? The way that Erich had complimented her beautiful chestnut hair and her intoxicating eyes—they were true to the real thing. If he had thought about this logically it would have been so obvious. The manager of the Snowy Silverwolf would never allow his precious daughter to man the counter all alone in a den of rowdy adventurers. To top it off, he had heard so many tales about her on the journey *to* Marsheim! Margit's appearance in those love stories about Goldilocks—despite some exceptions where she changed race for a more conservative audience—was dead-on.

A single glance should have told him everything he needed to know. But maybe Margit had made sure he didn't notice. She needed to determine whether this person by Erich's side was an ally or her quarry.

The reason for his cold sweat and those alarm bells in his head came clear in an instant. Although Margit had appeared unarmed,

she was appraising Mika as her prey. It didn't matter that he was a mage—spells required thoughts to manifest. The greatest magicians who could activate their permanent, powerful barriers instantly might be fine, but Margit wouldn't allow the mage the time to think and activate a spell before she killed him. With such speed, Mika was nothing more than a mere mortal.

With a smile, Margit had been appraising him. Not as Mika's enemy, but as Erich's guardian—to decide whether he deserved to be allowed to stand next to her most precious partner.

"Ha ha..." Mika felt a dry laugh escape him. He wanted to bite his lip at his foolishness and her skill. It didn't matter that he was a man at this moment; she wasn't pulling any punches in her assessment of him. Mika was certain of that. Just as he had heard of her, she had heard of him. She had known that although he was male at the moment, he would also transition between his neuter and female states too.

"Incredible... What a terror." Mika's breath was shot through with more than alcohol.

"Isn't she?!"

"Whoa!"

Without Mika realizing, Dietrich had come along. The zentaur slung her arm around his shoulders, pulling herself into what looked like an uncomfortable position.

"She got me good in the baths," Dietrich said. "I saw visions of myself kicking the bucket a good two or three times. I thought that was it for me."

"That's why you were white as a sheet when we left the bathhouse..."

"Well yeah, anyone would if they died a bunch of times in the bath!"

It was no surprise that Dietrich hadn't escaped her scrutiny either. Her first appearance before Erich had been to thunder into the tavern's yard and proclaim that she would take him home as her husband. There was no way that the arachne would stomach that. Dietrich didn't specify what exactly Margit had done to her, but feeling the dread of death run through her had evidently tempered

her somewhat. Even Erich had never managed that before.

"We got it tough, you and me. But in the absolute worst-case scenario, I'd be happy to keep up appearances by taking his seed back with me."

"H-His seed?!"

"My tribe's not too fussed about who your actual husband is, you see. Lotsa women try and do it with as many heroes as they can, and some couples don't hesitate to do it with other people too. It's not rare for kids to not know exactly who their parents are."

The zentaurs who made their home in the Empire had taken on the concept of nuclear families, but the tribes who still lived in the isles were completely different. Mika couldn't help but grimace at such an alien notion.

Dietrich had two people that she called her father and mother, but there was nothing that confirmed whether she was related to both of them. Children belonged to the whole tribe. They were its treasure and its assets and so they were raised with care. They were all born to the tribe, so what did it matter who their parents were? It seemed like this family system had allowed Dietrich to reach an early compromise.

"You have it tough too, Prof."

"What ever could you mean? I'm merely here as his friend."

Mika scratched his head and pulled out a cigarette. It was a special blend of his master's that calmed him down and bought him room in his own mind to concentrate, and Mika sorely needed its help right now. The paper was made from scrap bits of disused notes. He put it between his lips and lit it with a simple spell.

"Over here, old chum! I have someone to introduce you to."

The sweet fragrance of the herbs filled Mika's lungs; he felt the sensation flow through his body. The fogginess from the alcohol vanished in an instant, and his thoughts grew sharp and bright.

"I can hear you loud and clear, old pal. I'd be glad to be introduced to that lovely huntress beside you."

Mika needed the pick-me-up. After all, the night had only just begun.

[Tips] Whiskey is a multifaceted drink that changes character dramatically depending on how it is drunk. Rhinians often compare women to this amber ambrosia.

With a positively sunny disposition, Goldilocks introduced the arachne woman at his side: his childhood friend and his most trusted partner.

"It is a pleasure to finally meet you, esteemed magician," the huntress said. "I am Margit of Konigstuhl. In recent days I have become known as the Silent, Knapsack, or the Warding Dagger. I am gladdened to make your acquaintance."

Margit gave a ladylike curtsy with an alluring smile. In the heroic tales, she was well-known as Goldilocks's partner. In the recent boom of romantic songs, she was known as an eternally beautiful and skilled huntress. Her dazzling, fanged smile and her ability to disappear into Erich's shadow were praised as having no peer and befitting the golden-haired hero.

In truth, Margit had fended off many assailants who'd sought to establish themselves by felling Goldilocks. When rogues tried to ambush Goldilocks when it looked like he was alone, a single arrow loosed from the dark would pierce their fingers and rupture any dreams of glory by taking Goldilocks's head.

Cowardly assassins who feared Goldilocks hid in trees or on rooftops and sought to snipe by *any* means necessary. However, their plans never came to fruition. They would hear "You've been a bad boy" whispered in their ear before their thumbs and forefingers —vital to using a bow—were mercilessly slashed from their hands as payment for their misdeeds.

Margit had protected Goldilocks from every two-bit crook and bravo who'd come calling, and she'd earned names to fit the deed. But despite the level of her fame, there were only a few who knew exactly what kind of person she was or what she even looked like— proof enough of her stealth skills. It was especially impressive in a city that did not lack for aspiring musicians who questioned new and upcoming talent as material for their compositions.

Mika only belatedly realized what sort of monster had been toying

with him just a moment ago. He exhaled a plume of smoke as he got his head back into gear—just as he used to when invited to a tea party at the College. The truly frightening things weren't the formulae you could see. Words could be poison or a dagger; you needed to protect your own heart in order to weave your way through ill will that you couldn't even see.

Mika put on a softly sweet smile and spoke in a trilling way, not exposing any of his true intent.

"Thank you kindly. My name is Mika. You don't need to put any airs on around me," Mika said. "I've heard much about you from Erich."

"Is that quite right? He has told me a lot about you. He doesn't fail to bring up your name when the conversation drifts toward mages."

"What a surprise. A little embarrassing too, if I may add. Whenever we set out onto the road, he never hesitated to mention your name. Often saying how more confident he would be to have you at his side."

"Oh my."

"Ha ha."

To any regular onlooker, these would appear to be the usual pleasantries of two people with a mutual acquaintance meeting for the first time. Most of the people in the tavern thought as much. However, for the select few with a sharper eye and ear or who knew Margit's true nature, things did not appear so simple.

Siegfried felt a cold shiver run down his spine. It was all he could do not to spit out his drink. He recognized that smile of Margit's. It wasn't a smile at all; her canines were bare for all to see and her eyes shone with a dangerous light. That was the look she gave when eyeing up her prey. Although it pained him to admit it, all the time he had spent at Goldilocks's side had taught him about Margit. Whether she was going on a scouting mission, suggesting they use him to lure out an ambush, or looking at the women who tittered around Goldilocks, the smile was always the same.

There was nothing in the world that Siegfried wanted more in this moment than to go home. He felt a pang of monstrous envy about

his partner having already retired to their warm, cozy bed. What the hell was the point of free booze when you had to sit in this atmosphere? A film of sweat formed on his brow; no amount of booze made this situation worth it.

What exasperated Siegfried more than anything was that Erich couldn't sense any of this tension at all. Despite Goldilocks's absurdly keen sense toward an enemy's ill will or bloodlust, he was shockingly dull to the battleground of the social sphere—and that went doubly so for those in his inner circle. When it came to those he trusted, he was as insensate as a stump.

Erich invited Mika to sit down.

"Um, Erich? Why is she...?"

"Hm? What's up, Mika?" Erich replied.

Even as Mika sat down, Margit had maintained her position hanging from Erich's neck. Mika tried his best not to drop his cigarette as he asked the question, but it seemed like Erich didn't see anything about the scene as out of the ordinary. Margit hanging from his neck was as normal as having Schutzwolfe hanging at his waist. Having that pointed out after all this time only garnered a raised eyebrow.

As for Margit, she had found a good perch atop Erich. She removed her arms from his neck and placed them onto the table, leaning her head on her palms. Her smiling expression was like that of an innocent maiden, so long as you ignored how it was a transparent power move demonstrating just how close Erich had let her get.

It did not belabor retelling at this stage, but Goldilocks and the huntress's relationship had reached rather more intimate territory. They were practically inseparable in the bedroom. Indeed, it would be more surprising if they had not gotten so intimate by now.

By average Rhinian standards, you weren't liable to expect a woman to sit in a man's lap unless they'd already gotten *exceedingly familiar* with each other. Although a particular class of barmaid carried a reputation for crossing such a line more freely, most women would not be quite so brazenly inclined as to sit in a fellow's lap where others could see at all. For this pairing, their deep trust

and Margit's sweetness swept away any lascivious overtones—it was merely ordinary behavior between two lovebirds, shame far removed from the whole equation. One might be inclined to interpret this as evidence that the arachne possessed some sort of unique metaphysical asset, not unlike all of Erich's own.

All the same, the huntress flaunted her position. Barmaids often tended to flitter around heroes, but they weren't *always* in it for a simple chip—some dreamed of a night of bliss. This spider woman made sure to hammer the point home and crush any fleeting dream of groupiedom while also happily digging into the spread before her. Erich made sure to take care of his childhood friend and ordered her a cup of wine with added honey and water. Even since she'd become an adult, she, like most arachne, had proven herself a lightweight.

Amid this scene, it was almost funny how big the difference was between Siegfried, who felt the sweet alcohol turn into vinegar in his mouth, and Yorgos, who was awed at how true the stories were in depicting the closeness of Erich and Margit's relationship. No one had noticed Margit arrive until Erich had sensed her presence, and so he'd introduced Yorgos before Mika came over.

Although the ogre was still yet immature, he had seen his share of battles, and he was impressed with how Margit could have sneaked her way to the table without him so much as noticing her. At the same time, due to the social structure of his tribe, Yorgos didn't have much experience with women, and so he didn't even realize that this atmosphere would be painful for some. For all intents and purposes, he was probably the happiest one at the table.

Yorgos was happily drinking away as he noticed that Margit was just as sweet and small as the stories said. Siegfried was on the lookout for a chance to slip away, perfectly happy to receive the rebuke for it at a later date. Mika was readying the next opportunity for a counterattack as he smoked and chatted about the dried meats.

And Erich, happily blind to the suffocating atmosphere, spoke next.

"Mika, that's a peculiar thing you're smoking on there."

"Hm? Oh, this?"

The cigarette quivered for a moment in Mika's lips.

Smoking was the preserve of the wealthy middle class, nobles, and magia. It wasn't too common to see your average citizen puffing away on some mixture of herbs. The most common method was to enjoy your chosen blend over a slightly longer time period by using a pipe, but in a certain region, many enjoyed the simple method of a rolled-up paper cigarette. You even found some slightly more lethargic types who liked to enjoy a hookah pipe from the comfort of a sofa. However, pipes still reigned supreme in the Empire.

Goldilocks enjoyed puffing on his own pipe and enjoyed a mixture of sweet herbs. His own preferred concoction relaxed the throat and had a pleasant fragrance which counterbalanced the smell of sweat. The mage, on the other hand, was holding something that looked unfamiliar to him.

"It's a mix of herbs concocted by my master. It calms the nerves and nourishes my mana."

"Ooh... I don't see these paper cigarettes much. Was that also a suggestion on your master's behalf?"

"No, this is something I copied off someone I spotted in the capital once. It seemed rather convenient, even if they're spoken off with some disgust at gatherings for lacking any class. But look—they are rather handy little things, aren't they?"

The purls of lavender smoke smelled faintly of citrus, a tartness that was closer to orange than lemon, and wouldn't be out of place in an incense burner. Enchantment had smoothed away the harsh edge; it seemed like someone had squeezed drops of juice right into the fragrant smoke.

"It smells terrific and seems very handy. It can be a bit of a pain carrying around my pipe kit all the time."

"Do you not have it on you today?"

"No. I didn't even see in my wildest dreams such a happy occurrence today."

Erich gave a bashful smile and raised his cup. The mage grinned back, and with a clunk, their joy was shared.

The adventurer had planned to take it easy for the rest of the day after the training session in the afternoon. While he was a true-blue

adventurer, that didn't mean that he partook in alcohol every day of the week. A proper schedule during his time back home allowed his internal clock to reset after days out on the road.

It seemed to those around him that since Goldilocks had risen in rank, he was hustling a lot less than he once did. The reason could be found in the fact that his adventures had been worthy enough to be put into song despite his relatively low rank. Because of that, he had received many job offers far below the market value of his actual worth. Although the buzz had settled down in recent days, Goldilocks had been conscious enough to realize that if he undersold himself, it would only make things harder for his fellow adventurers. Now he was more selective in his jobs and took fewer of them.

Your reputation preceded you as an adventurer. If people found out you were giving your services for cheaper than you should, then your value would drop. With a clan under his leadership, Erich had realized he needed to brush up his appearances and decided to change tack. The long and short of it was that today Erich was without his pipe; he had been ready for a light postworkout meal and an early night, and so he hadn't envisioned needing it.

"Then how about I give you one?" Mika said, looking at this friend's hungry expression and pulling out another cigarette from an inner pocket.

"Are you sure?" Erich replied.

"Perfectly. Although I can't guarantee it'll be to your tastes. It's mixed to my own personal preference, you see."

"Have I ever complained about something you have given me, chum?"

With a broad smile, Erich accepted the cigarette. It was a simple thing, a wad of leaves wrapped in a scrap of paper, but he took it as if he were accepting a shiny drachma. Without any hesitation he lifted it to his lips. The huntress, who was watching keenly, furrowed her brow.

Margit and everyone close to him knew that despite his easygoing appearance, Erich was a careful and prudent individual. He would never so easily indulge in something that someone had simply given him. Anything magically altered usually warranted his highest level

of caution. Of course, even if the person handing it off hadn't tampered with in any way, that didn't guarantee that a third party hadn't done something untoward during the delivery. The huntress also kept on guard to make sure ne'er-do-wells didn't harm Erich through consumables like this or through other methods.

Despite it all, here Erich was with seemingly zero concern and caution as he placed the cigarette between his own lips.

A tiny crack formed in the pride that Margit silently held. The huntress had believed that the only people to whom Erich extended his absolute trust, for now and forevermore, were his family and herself. As she watched someone else step into this sacred realm, Margit felt herself receiving a counterattack, even if no one was aware of it. Was there really someone else in this world with whom Erich could be so easy?

Without showing a shred of this emotional damage, the huntress moved away from Erich's lap to fetch him the candle on the table to light his cigarette with. Margit took it as her own personal job and pastime to help Erich out in small ways in their day-to-day. She wasn't sure why, but maybe due to his days working under a noble, he had developed a bad habit of cutting corners in small areas of his life. This side to him was somewhat charming to Margit; she enjoyed helping him out with a smile. Lighting up Erich's pipe was an old routine of hers, and she set to it as usual, when...

"Erich, I've got you."

"Hm?"

She heard the scrape of a chair being pushed backward. Mika had leaned over, proffering the cigarette still between his lips to Erich. Realizing what Mika was implying, Erich angled in and touched the tip of his cigarette to Mika's.

As Mika breathed in, his cigarette flushed with heat. These were simple cigarettes, without even a filter, and so they glowed easily. As one cigarette was already alight, it wasn't difficult to transfer that flame elsewhere. Just as a skilled smoker could take a spark that had spilled ashes from a pipe to light a new batch of herbs without it going out, you could light your own cigarette with any fire source.

Everyone around the table held their breaths as they watched the

scene unfold, an act almost like a kiss. Skin did not touch, no saliva changed owners, but it was enough to see the strength of the bond between the pair.

The crackle of burning paper cut through the air. The sight of the smoke from both of their mouths mingling in the air had a strangely sensual edge to it.

"Mm. A more tart smoke is good every once in a while," Erich said.

"Nothing could please me more than to hear you enjoy it," Mika replied.

The two returned to their original postures as they smiled at each other. The ogre turned away awkwardly as if he had seen something he shouldn't. Siegfried had his head in his hands, wondering what the hell he was being forced to watch as he used the mental image of Kaya to keep ahold of his sanity.

As for Margit, she was hidden in the shadow of a group of barmaids who quietly squealed at the sight, and was dumbstruck. Then she pulled an expression that she had barely ever made in her life; she puffed her cheeks in disappointment.



[Tips] Part of the ritual of smoking involves preparing the herbs and pipe from a kit. A growing number of people prefer the ease of a cigarette, but those in the upper classes view this as positively barbaric.

Under a hazy moon that quietly waited for the eventual dawn, Goldilocks and his group made their way back home. At night, Marsheim was similar to Berylin; the darkness was deep and quiet. Every now and then a few peals of laughter and the sounds of arguments could be heard from the few bars that stayed open late.

Wondering what the nocturnal folk were up to right now, Mika gave a small shiver as the residual warmth of the alcohol evanesced into the cool early spring night. In truth, he had wanted to have a few more drinks, but the party had been brought to a close, as many had work the next morning, and Goldilocks's budget wasn't actually limitless. Some of the partygoers who had fallen were flung into their beds by those who had survived the night. Those who had found someone to share the remains of the night with went off to private rooms.

The group decided that it was about time for them too to head back home to sleep. They filed out of the tavern and said their goodbyes to Yorgos. The ogre, who had picked up multiple unconscious folk all at once, had decided that he would also stay at the Snowy Silverwolf.

Turning down Yorgos's insistent claims that he would carry his luggage for him, Mika carried his belongings with a handy bit of ornithurgy. As he walked, he gave a little sigh.

He would tally the night up as one victory and two losses.

As he reflected on the night's proceedings, he felt that it was a success in the main. After all, he had managed to show the huntress that she wasn't the only one who could protect Erich—wasn't the only one with his complete and utter trust.

All the same, an opponent who knew your strengths was terrifying.

They marched to comfy beds, Erich held Margit delicately. With one hand on her waist and the other holding up her spider body, he

carried her with the focus and vigilance that one would afford a swaddled babe. Margit had ignored Erich's concern as she drank enough alcohol to knock herself out.

Watching Erich carry her with so much love made Mika realize that their relationship went even deeper than his and Erich's. The night had ended with the biggest and most painful blow.

"What troubles you, old chum?"

"Hm? Oh... Nothing," Mika said, shaking his head at his perceptive friend. "I'm just feeling the alcohol a little. I'm sure it'll settle down soon. Don't you worry about me."

"You sure? Don't shoulder everything yourself. If things are hard, merely say the word."

Mika inwardly told himself: *This is fine.* Erich had carried him home when he had drunk himself into a stupor in the past. If he weren't able to walk right now, he had no doubt that Erich would pick him up too. Mika might have been taller now, but Erich was someone who wouldn't blanch at the task.

"Okay. I will if I need to."

"Wh-Whoa, Mika? You're making it a little difficult to walk!"

"You can lend a friend a shoulder, no?"

"You're just as helpless as her, huh."

Mika told himself that he needn't worry. It was fine for things to change as long as the important parts didn't, he thought with a gentle smile. Bothersome work awaited him, but he held out hope for fun days ahead.

[Tips] Nocturnal races are often charged with nighttime delivery jobs. These are often carried out outside the city walls.

0.1 Hendersons

Henderson Scale 0.1

A derailing event that has no impact on the overarching story, or a separate tale that serves to add extra context. As long as it doesn't take too much time, it's always nice to plump up the tale.

"Rise and shine, Fellows!"

Mornings with the Fellowship of the Blade began early, even if the night before had ended in much drinking and carousing.

In the large dorm room of the Snowy Silverwolf, Yorgos blinked awake at Etan's bellowing morning alarm. Pulling himself up, the ogre stretched his neck from left to right. The exhaustion in his body told him that he had put back quite the impressive number of drinks last night. Luckily for Yorgos, his ogre's metabolism allowed him to process an inhuman amount of alcohol and wake up without so much as a headache.

Some of the other clan candidates—others who, like Yorgos, had knocked on the Fellowship's door to join—groggily pulled themselves awake, the alcohol still buzzing in their heads, but Etan gave no quarter. One of the ironclad rules of the Fellowship was to drink your alcohol without it drowning you. Goldilocks had warned them of the dangers of drunkenly signing a contract with anything but a lucid grasp of its terms. His Fellows didn't quite grasp his meaning, but they did know that debts were no good, so they made sure to make merry but not get completely hammered.

The prospective members were kicked awake before the first bell—around five o'clock in the morning—and assembled in the yard.

"Let's kick off the day with some morning practice!" Etan shouted.

"Roger!" came the group's reply. Yorgos's own booming voice

came a beat after the rest.

At the current moment in time, the Fellowship of the Blade had thirty officially sanctioned members and fifty or so adventurers who were still candidates. Over eighty voices in chorus made for quite the racket.

The other adventurers who made the Snowy Silverwolf their home often went to check the bulletin board for jobs around this time. It was partially because the Fellowship was a little frightening for an average adventurer, but also because the day's jobs were posted around this hour too. The raucous cries from the yard had become their own personal alarm clock.

"Let's start things with a jog. Follow me, people."

The Fellowship's training began with building stamina. Adventurers needed to swing their sword and stay on the road for the long haul; this was a job that required a healthy and resilient body. If you wanted to succeed in this business, the endurance to handle a long march was more precious than a mighty sword that could pierce a dragon's scales.

"They're...fast..." Yorgos panted to himself.

The Fellowship started with this early morning run in part because there were fewer people out and about. Formed into two lines, the group ran a trifle slower than a sprint. This pace was critical. It was the most efficient cruising speed for when they needed to hurry to a destination without stopping; it was the perfect speed to catch up to a carriage that had left you behind. The Fellowship trained its members to be able to run at this pace for at least two hours.

That was especially true for the Fellowship's area of expertise for recent jobs: bodyguard missions. You were as good as useless if you couldn't dash after a carriage under attack or if you were left behind by a caravan that needed to hurry due to being stuck in the muck.

They weren't running fast enough to utterly *preclude* two hours of constant movement, but they did feel the burn when they arrived back at the Snowy Silverwolf after an urban half-marathon.

"Good job, people. Those with jobs, hop to it. Newbies, you've got training. I'll be leadin' ya today, so get your heads in the game,"

the audhumbla announced.

While the newbies were wheezing, the official members headed to the well to wash off the nice sweat they'd worked up before finishing up prep for the day's work.

In its current iteration, the Fellowship of the Blade was divided into four units, each under the leadership of one of the first four recruits to the clan. When they received jobs from their clients, each of these four headed smaller squads of four to six. One unit was always on standby, and the present leader was tasked with educating the newbies.

Today Etan's unit was off duty, and so it fell to him to lead the training for the four members in his unit and the many newbies. After the morning run, the next item on the menu was practicing sword form.

"Today's your first day, Yorgos, so we don't have a training sword for you just yet. You can use mine," Etan said.

"Th-This is really heavy," Yorgos said.

"Well, yeah? It's got a lead core."

"Lead?!"

It felt odd to hold a wooden sword heavier than the real thing. In fact, this was the second of the two types of training sword used by the Fellowship. The first was a regular old completely wooden sword, whereas the other was a lead bar sheathed in wood. It was Goldilocks's opinion that if you trained with a weapon that weighed *more* than the one you used in a real fight, then it would make the real thing that much easier. The result was an offensively heavy instrument.

"Aaall right, one hundred straight vertical swings: Begin!"

At Etan's call, the Fellows began their practice swings. Yorgos stretched his neck, ready for such a low number, but it wasn't long before he realized how foolish he had been.

"Your wrist's curved! You won't be able to cut a bastard like that. Again!"

"Your cutting edge ain't straight. Throw that sword away if you wanna use a bat!"

"You're all over the place! Call that a straight cut? Keep doing that

and I'll cut ya down before you can even head into battle!"

The yard was filled with Etan's barked instructions. Those who received his criticism had to redo the swing until they got it right, or in the worst cases, start again from zero. In the Fellowship, you needed to perform a swing that could cut an enemy down in one clean strike or it wouldn't count. Yorgos learned this lesson firsthand.

"You're lettin' your muscles make up for your technique sometimes, but you got good form," the audhumbla said to the ogre.

"I've...seen...warriors...in...battle..." Yorgos said amid heavy wheezing.

Vertical swings, diagonal swings from both directions, and thrusts made up the menu of basic sword training. If you were perfect, you could finish in four hundred swings, but Yorgos's first day of training ended up with him repeating some swings once or twice. His sturdy body and long history of watching the proud warriors of his own tribe model pitch-perfect form had saved him from even more.

Until now, training for Yorgos had merely been something to observe. Men simply were not allowed to wield the blade. They were not expected to rise above their station. After all, in an ogre tribe a man's work lay elsewhere. This role in itself was important and noble, but it had led Yorgos ever further from the path of the sword. As the days passed, his dreams could no longer be contained, and he had set out to make them reality.

"Haven't seen someone manage to finish in under five hundred swings on their first day in a while."

"The boss is way stricter, so don't get lax!"

"I must've swung about a thousand times on my first day."

"Hah, yeah right. Was twice that at best."

The official members laughed as they set to their own training.

These Fellows ran through the standard drills and a battery of more complex techniques. Despite their small talk, their form was immaculate. They had grown as warriors to the point that using the sword was as intuitive as a spoon or fork. Enough constant training had meant that at this stage it would be harder to mess up. Even if some of their movements were distracted, they were still beautifully done.

One of Goldilocks's rules was that you could only chat mid-training once your swings were consistently stable. If you could only fight when focusing all your attention on your enemy, then you couldn't function as part of an adventuring unit. Sometimes the situation might arise where you needed to ignore the enemy in front of you to help an ally, or you might have to redirect your attention to a new enemy who had broken through the blockade and was on their way to the target you were meant to protect. Adventurers were always outnumbered by bandits and mercenaries and so needed to think on their feet. This was a lesson Goldilocks had run through countless times by now.

"Caught your breath, people?" Etan said.

"Yeah..."

Once Etan had made sure the rookies had finished their practice well enough and had a short break, he set about designating jobs. It was still early in the morning, just before the regular folk headed out to work, and for the Fellowship, there were a lot of requests even for its trial members. Whereas soot-black and ruby-red adventurers couldn't be tasked with important gigs like delivering important goods from a regular merchant, doing security and cleaning work for a friendly tavern, or keeping watch at an absent noble's manor, there was still a lot of cheap grunt work that the Fellowship was entrusted with. One of the benefits of being in the Fellowship during the early stages of your career was that you could take on jobs that were far more pleasant than the grueling labor that other rookies had to slog through.

"Seeing as it's your first day, Yorgos, you can do some chores for the Fellowship and—"

A huge yawn cut Etan off. "Man, I slept like a log... Maybe I had one too many drinks."

It was Dietrich. Dressed in casual clothes and with scruffy enough hair that suggested she'd just rolled out of bed, the sloppy zentaur seemed like she didn't have a care in the world.

"Oh... H-Hello, Dietrich..."

While she had been welcomed by the Fellowship, Etan still did not know exactly how to treat this newcomer. The Fellowship was a clan

that valued meritocracy and looked down on pompous windbags.

The problem with Dietrich was that she was a fearsome warrior who had not only fought well against Goldilocks Erich, but also managed to make him smile—an indicator that he had acknowledged death was a real possibility. The Fellows knew instinctively that even if they all dogpiled her at once, they wouldn't be able to kill this seasoned warrior. At the same time, she was just *so undisciplined*. Etan had made some concessions—maybe she hadn't heard the wake-up call, as she had been sleeping in a solo room like many of the women in their roster—but he didn't expect her to come down to this group of men looking so sloppy.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

Etan didn't even know where to begin. She was clearly far stronger than him. Not only that, she was a guest of their boss—but she hadn't exactly been explicitly welcomed as one of their number. Indeed, although she had said she would take Erich as her husband, she hadn't said anything about actually joining their clan.

In short, she was an outsider who could pummel everyone present. Etan was stuck for words. He couldn't make her train; he couldn't ask her to do chores. He looked around at the others for what to say to this warrior, but no one could give him an answer.

"Oh, well, um..."

As Etan sputtered nothing of note, Dietrich tilted her head in curiosity and took a few good sniffs.

"I smell the scent of a warrior... Huh, you guys are pretty serious."

It might have been the morning after a party, but Dietrich wanted to do some exercise too. A true zentaur warrior, her instincts made her eager to work up a sweat and do some training regardless of circumstances.

"Though it's pretty cramped. Hey, d'you know anywhere I can go running?" Dietrich asked.

"Ah, I think I might," the audhumbla said in response to this surprising question. "We were just about to head to the Seal Brown Stables, you see."

"Stables? Ah, so Erich's horses are there?"

"I didn't realize you were acquainted. So, one of our jobs today is to give the boss's and the Fellowship's horses some exercise."

This had been the job that Etan was about to give Yorgos. In order to increase the Fellowship's ability to cover great distances in a hurry, they now had two medium-sized carriages and eight horses, including Erich's Dioscuri. It was a surprisingly large number, but Erich had stated that they would be low on manpower if only a small number of people could speed on ahead, leaving everyone else behind.

"It'll be a great help to have you around. None of us can ride, you see," Etan said.

"Huh, really?" Dietrich replied.

However, Erich's dreams of a clan of capable horse riders had not materialized. Because he had been riding since a boy, he didn't realize just how much time and effort it took to learn. Siegfried was a textbook example of how locals around here didn't ride—it was reserved for higher-born folk. Even if your farm might have a horse or two, you would sit atop it only while playing as a child.

The sad result was that the Fellowship's warhorses were used as packhorses. Any cavalry training was left by the wayside with their busy daily schedule. Goldilocks had bought the horses through a noble connection; with the nice discount he had received, he had bought them as handily as he might a loaf of bread, and unfortunately he hadn't foreseen this outcome.

"A guy called Martyn is usually in charge of handling them."

"The kid? The cunning one? Huh."

"Well, you can't really ride a horse unless you're a mensch or smaller. Look at me—horse'd probably break its back if I got on top," Etan said, spreading his arms out wide.

The audhumbla was around two meters in height. His tough musculature was closer to his oxen ilk's than it was to a mensch's. There weren't terribly many warhorses in the entire Empire to begin with. The ones that could support someone like Etan had mostly been co-opted by this or that noble already without much chance of being given up. For nobles, a row of magnificent horses in front of their manors made a wonderful visual deterrent.

"And well, Yorgos, I don't need to be the one to tell you..."

"Yeah... For my tribe, warhorses were something we stole from enemies to eat..."

For an ogre, riding a horse was an impossible dream. Even counting dragons, the list of creatures that could reasonably support a two-to three-meter hulk packing metal bones and alloyed skin was *very* short.

Some natural philosophers had theorized that one of the reasons mensch had proliferated so widely was not solely due to their dexterity and wide range of viable breeding partners, but because they were able to exploit the unique benefits of horseback riding.

"Yeah, so one of our big chores is to let them run about as they like. You wouldn't get outrun by them, would you, Dietrich?"

"Of course not. Who do you take me for?"

As soon as she said this, she was gone, only leaving a gust of wind in her wake. Etan and Yorgos spun around to see her next to the well. She had moved so quickly that it seemed like she had simply skipped the space between the two points.

"Centaurs are born running. Speed is one of our great points of pride. If I got outrun by a *horse,* I'd be the laughingstock of my tribe."

Yorgos was dumbstruck. He didn't know Dietrich, or anyone in fact, could move this fast. Zentaurs were not uncommon in the Southern Sea region, but they were mostly subdued types who had chosen a life of agriculture or urbanism. It was no surprise that the zentaurs of the northern isles, who spent their days playing out the war games of their housecarls, were far quicker, in speed and to anger, than their relations in the Southern Sea, despite their fame for their uncivilized conduct during the Age of Gods.

A light bulb suddenly went on over Etan's head. He wondered if this was the end of his days of being pulled around by those horses who just wanted to dash ever faster...

[Tips] The Fellowship of the Blade is known, among various things, for its one-hundred-swing training sessions. Each swing is only counted if its form is perfect. In later

days this practice would evolve into outright martial asceticism, with practitioners seeking to deliver hundreds of perfectly balanced strikes each day. This practice serves as a good filter for greedy individuals who want to bask in the fame and glory of the clan without putting in any of the effort.

"Um, Etan?" Yorgos asked. "You haven't just been running around trying to catch the horses until now, have you?"

"No, they're smart critters. They come back to the stables when they get hungry. But they're also kinda rascals. When it's time to head in, they'll wait until I've just got 'em, then start dashin' off again..."

The audhumbla spoke as he watched over the horses running over the hillocks. Among them were Erich's Dioscuri, the four warhorses that Erich had bought, and two colts that looked surprisingly similar to Castor and Polydeukes.

Yorgos understood in a moment what a tough job this was. He had experienced something very similar. When the warriors of his tribe were out on an excursion, it fell to him and the other men who stayed behind to watch over and play with the little warriors of about five or six who were still too young for battle. With a similar look in their eyes, Yorgos, his father, and his brothers would watch them cajole and play.

The horses were free from their reins and used the full force of their steely muscles to gallop and prance as much as they liked. The four warhorses had been procured after a bandit-quelling mission. The arrangement had been that any spoils would go to the client, but Goldilocks had taken a real shine to these horses—which had once belonged to a dirty local lord's cavalry—and had bought them from the client at a reduced rate.

However, the two colts were different. They had sturdy necks, powerful legs, and muscular chests. Their intelligent inky eyes were a spitting image of the two brothers that had been with Erich since his childhood. The answer was a simple one: They were the children of Erich's Dioscuri.

The Seal Brown Stables allowed the horses under their care to mate—so long as they had the approval of the horses' owners—and Erich's horses had successfully begun relations with two mares that he had approved of. The result was the two young horses dashing around with boundless energy; they had successfully sired a new generation. More horses would no doubt be on the way, and Erich had cut a deal with the stable master—the first two horses would go to Erich, and the next two would go to the owner of the mares. Although the horses that would come from the next breeding season would have lives elsewhere, right now the scene was a positively familial one.

The older brother was Clytemnestros and the younger was Helenos. Just like his Dioscuri, Erich had taken another leaf out of Greek mythology in naming these two cousins. Without a care for any of the onlookers, they dashed about.

"C'mon, over here! Ho! Ho!"

The one at the head of the pack was a zentaur dressed in combat gear, minus her armor.

"You guys are pretty fast, but you'll need more than that to catch up to me! Ho! Ho!" Dietrich shouted. Her cries were a cultural staple in the northern isles when chasing horses, *not* when you were being chased by them. Seemingly unwilling to be outmatched, Polydeukes and Castor dashed ever onward—and maybe they had received more consistent exercise, because the other four warhorses couldn't quite keep up. As for the two colts, their boundless energy finally had an outlet, and they had run so much that they'd worn themselves down into a slower trot.

"Wow, I've never seen those two bundles of energy look so exhausted," Etan said.

"Should I go rein them in?" Yorgos asked.

"That'd be great. Those two love people, so even with your mug, you should be all right."

Yorgos forced down the urge to say, "You can talk," as he dashed off with some reins to bring the horses in.

Etan scratched the base of his horn and looked up to the sky. With someone like Dietrich who could actually control the horses,

maybe the Fellowship would one day have its own cavalry. He could understand Erich's logic: More mobility meant more possible jobs. He too had struggled to deal with enemies on horseback who could fire at him from a perpetually safe distance. It would be a great help to be able to deal with such situations, but the audhumbla did wonder...

"Is this really the kinda stuff an adventurer does...?"

The Empire was a wide and sprawling place, but the Fellowship of the Blade would be the only clan across the land with its own light cavalry. At times he wondered just what direction they were heading in. Etan wouldn't be surprised if Goldilocks was raring to integrate that magician into their fold too. The audhumbla wasn't a learned lad, but even he knew just how incredible the College in Berylin was. If Goldilocks wanted to include someone who was destined to be a noble among their number, that said some grim things about the future he was preparing for.

Etan was but one mere adventurer who lived in Marsheim, but even he could catch the whiffs of instability fomenting in the region. The arrival of these new members didn't seem fortunate insofar as it seemed *calculated*, somehow. Rather than the fickle whims of the God of Cycles and God of Trials, it seemed like the machinations of his leader that he so admired.

Goldilocks Erich was always in search of a battlefield. He never ceased in his desire to find an opponent, a bloody fray, a worthy foe that he would fell at the cost of his own life. It wasn't a leap of the imagination for Etan to picture that Erich was crafting some sort of grander scheme where he would save Marsheim, like a great hero in one of the ancient myths. In fact, he thought that Erich might be able to pull it off.

"Things aren't gonna ever be quiet around here," Etan mumbled as he watched the horses. His quiet words seemed to come not from his own belief, but echoing down from out of the days to come...

Late Spring of the Eighteenth Year (II)

Travel Prep

One cannot simply strike out on an adventure without making suitable preparations beforehand. Such preparations do not amount to solely scribbling down your inventory on your character sheet either; there are meetings to be made, acquaintances to be introduced, and all other sorts of paraphernalia that need sorting.

I had long since gotten used to the concept that overdoing something was just as bad as underdoing it. That went double now that I had schmoozed my way into being the head of a reasonably sized clan. An excessively large weapon would swing its wielder around instead, and in the worst-case scenario, one's own undeveloped core strength would buy you an embarrassing, pitiful death. Living comfortably hinged on choosing tools of precisely the right size and weight for you.

Limelit had been a truly sound investment. With the poets stuffing me into a whole range of songs without my knowledge, the experience had started rolling in as the tales spread across the land. I had been super jazzed to see that even such minor, grassroots fame counted toward Limelit; I felt like a lottery winner, desperate to leverage my winnings before the vultures and taxmen came to take their cut.

Alas, when I looked at my character sheet, excited to have gotten a lot stronger from all that banked-up experience, I noticed a teensy problem. Now, it wasn't anything embarrassing; I'd gotten to an admirable mid-level state. For a certain system, you might tell me that it was time to put down ol' reliable Mr. Mace and take up the

sword to improve my damage output. The issue was that I hadn't really fostered the kind of power you can find on a character sheet. I had attained a lot more on a material level—in terms of people and items.

"Mmh, morning, huh..." I mumbled, waking up at the same time I did every morning. I felt that familiar sense of safety with the warm presence on my chest. I opened my eyes in the pale morning and saw Margit sleeping soundly upon me. Her breathing was steady; the light movement of her chest suggested she was still deep in the realm of slumber.

Our chests were close and I could feel her heart beating, but strangely enough it felt like our hearts were beating in time; it felt like our very lives were entwined with each other.

Yesterday had delivered a reunion that I could never have seen in my wildest dreams, and Margit had ended up drinking with such speed that I wondered if this was some kind of challenge. She had ended up zonking out and I'd carried her home. With her atop me now, my thoughts drifted to when she and I had stepped up our relationship. I felt so guilty about it now. I had been so caught up in my own problems, and in the end Margit had ended up "giving up" herself to me in order to cheer me up. I wished I'd been more capable of dealing with my own crap; I should have been the one to have made her first night special and impossible to forget.

I had made her wait all while her ideal age for marriage had pretty much passed her by, I'd brought her out here with the less-than-extravagant lifestyle that I had chosen, and to top it off I had been so weak as to force her into giving up something else for me. If I was honest, it was pretty shameful. Margit had always been so fiercely loyal to me, and I wanted to take responsibility. Our relationship was pleasant, yes, but I didn't want to just keep dragging things out. The last thing I wanted to be was someone who uprooted their partner's life and didn't take responsibility for all that was to come. I wasn't the type of person to do that to her and just take advantage.

So last night, with my old chum's arrival from afar, I had tried to have a serious conversation about things—but, well, it didn't quite

go to plan. In more direct terms, after a bit of skirt-lifting teasing, those desires I had quashed at age fifteen had exploded out once again.

This was something I had known in theory, but had little recourse to actually experience: My soul was reaching its fifties, but it was still subject to the age of my physical body. Just like how a soul in its thirties had gotten worked up about the silly children's game of fox and geese while I was still a child, my body was in its late teens, and that meant I was susceptible to the whims of someone that age.

In hindsight, maybe I should have been grateful. It was probably that youthful part of me that allowed me to hold on to my foolish dreams of being an adventurer. It was a slightly different example, but back on Earth, I noticed that people my age who dressed younger were a bit more active and energetic.

Whatever the reason, I had contradictory physical and mental states, and that meant that my relationship with Margit was still very much physical. On the first day we slept together, it was my first time doing it in quite some time. Adding in the fact that mensch and arachne have different builds, I lost sight and control of my limits and ended up going quite overboard. I still felt guilty about it. It made it more difficult to process with my perhaps old-fashioned way of thinking that the guy was always responsible, even if the other party had been eager and open from the jump. After we'd done it, Margit and I had lain together in bed, and she whispered to me in an exhausted voice: "Don't overthink things. Do as you like. I'll always be behind you."

It felt like I was hearing the same blessing that I'd heard upon first arriving in this world. A whole range of emotions that I couldn't put into words had come welling up. This woman would be with me, despite all my selfish flaws, and permitted me to do as I wished until I was satisfied. Could there be a happier set of words for any man to hear from his lover?

That was why I continued to adventure with her as my partner. Despite my own internal warnings that I shouldn't do so, I couldn't help but allow myself to make the most of her kindness. Margit had followed up what she said with "I'll do as I please in return," but all

the same, my doting on her made me feel a little bit pathetic again.

The word family came to mind. Family... I couldn't quite envision it.

"Mm... You're awake?"

As I lost myself to my thoughts, Margit awoke. The Wine God must have still been present; she still seemed rather dozy. I stroked her head and told her she could sleep in as long as she liked.

"Mmh... Then shall we spend some more time together?" she said in a soft but hoarse voice. She clutched tighter at the old shirt I wore as nightwear. I pushed down the urge to give in to this sweet invitation. It was a day off today, but if I let my urges get the best of me we would end up spending all day in bed. Lazing around all day with your loved one wasn't a bad idea, but I had stuff to do.

I needed to show Mika around and then I needed to get the whole story from Siegfried about the "shitstorm" he had been through.

It was almost cute how much Sieg said that Kaya was his one and only ally, but his protestations did nothing in the face of the public eye, which saw him as part of my own party. That had the knock-on effect that I needed to pull my own weight and provide support if he had done a job that was more pain than it was worth. It was generally accepted that once the involved parties had paid up, the job needed to be taken on. However, if we got ahead of ourselves, it wouldn't be good for either of us in the long run.

I declined Margit's alluring touch and got out of bed. She too rubbed her eyes and forced her body to crawl out of the bed. Here she was, keeping watch over me when I told her she didn't need to. She was truly irreplaceable.

We got dressed and headed down to the mess hall. It had been three years since we'd made the Snoozing Kitten our home.

"Good morning," Shymar said. "Oh, looking at you, it seems like you *are* having a good morning."

At this early hour, the mess hall was empty and the lady of the house was doing some cleaning. Her black coat was as sleek as ever, and she gave a nice smile as she saw the sleepy Margit hanging from my neck.

“Good morning, Missus,” I said. “May I use the kitchen?”

“Be my guest. If you use it as you usually do, please make sure to put things back afterward. Don’t go overboard now.”

The missus left the room with a slightly dark chuckle—I mean, she wasn’t wrong, so I had no comeback—and I headed to the kitchen and unleashed the magic I usually kept hidden in my daily life. Without much difficulty, I summoned a number of Unseen Hands to chuck some firewood onto the fire (three assarii for a bundle) before casting a small ignition spell to set them ablaze. Even a small spark was enough to get a roaring fire going, and soon I was ready to get down to whipping up some grub.

“What are you cooking up?” Margit asked.

“A milk-based soup. What do you think?” I said.

“Ahh... Yes, that sounds perfect for when the Wine God is overstaying His welcome.”

I couldn’t cook so well with her hanging off my front, so I moved Margit to hang down my back and picked an onion from the produce shelf. A metal jug of milk from a local farm was chilling in some water; I took a saucepan’s worth for the dish. I was grateful for this handy system—as long as you wrote down what you used and paid for it after, you could take what you needed.

I fried the thinly sliced onion and butter together to bring out its natural sweetness. Then I added in some dried meat and herbs to remove some of the gamey flavor, and let the concoction stew in the milk. This stew was my all-purpose hangover cure. I wanted to include some instant stock or black pepper, but the former belonged to a distant time and place and the latter could set you back several silver pieces just for a few pinches.

Luckily, this was a dish that tasted pretty good without too many ingredients, and it didn’t take too long to whip up either. I poured the stew into two shallow bowls, and Margit began eating it with a quick word of thanks.

“Do you need any bread?” I asked.

“I’m fine...”

Oof, she was really feeling it. Margit always ate some bread and meat to keep her energy up, but she was too exhausted for that. I

supposed it wasn't too much of a surprise after how much whiskey she'd drunk straight. As I watched her spoon the stew into her mouth, I heard two pairs of footsteps come down the stairs. I could tell who it was from their weight and gait.

"Good morning, Siegfried, Kaya," I said.

"Don't do that before we've even come in. Grosses me out," Sieg said.

"Good morning, Erich," Kaya said.

My two friends had finally awoken, and it seemed that while Siegfried still looked absolutely exhausted, Kaya had managed to shake off some of the fatigue from their journey. They had also gotten used to a regular wake-up time and as such hadn't been able to sleep in, despite how tired they were, not to mention the fact that dirty beds meant that poor adventurers developed a habit of not staying in bed for too long. They hadn't been able to really benefit from an early night, and here they were ready to start the day.

I shared some of the stew with them and finally asked about their most recent job.

Sieg grunted as he stirred his stew and grimaced.

"Talk about a shitty gig, man..."

Just what had happened at all those roadhouses?

"C'mon, even I can tell it's weird that fully *half* of the inns we hit up had gone crooked," Siegfried muttered as he finished giving the rundown of the hellish time he and Kaya had out on the road. Even as he ate, his expression never shifted from one of total disgust.

"Yeah, it is odd..." I said. "You were going down a trading route along one of the main highways."

It really was strange. This was supposed to have been a pretty cut-and-dried job, even if it had a lot riding on it. What was going on?

"A lot of them roadhouses that turned bandit were in tight with the travelers' towns nearby. I hate to break bad news to ya, but we were in no position to be hauling anyone to the Guard or what have you. Had to just cut 'em down where they stood. Some of those places, even the *kids* were in on the hustle. Makes me want to puke just thinkin' about it..."

"Seriously?"

"That's what I wanna be askin'! I thought we'd run out of salt before we were even halfway home."

It wasn't rare for jobs that only *looked* simple on paper to find their way to the Fellowship. Some of these roadhouses were being run by government-approved folk, so we were told that if we turned up anything below board it would be a big stain on the Mars-Baden family name. They were confident, but in order to make absolutely sure, they had sent us ahead as a scout of sorts to make sure things were ticking along as they ought. But Siegfried's story upended all my expectations. How could *half* of these places have fallen into such disrepair?

My comrade's comment about running out of salt wasn't a culinary concern. Salt had been supplied on the off chance that the heads of the owners of these highway inns might need salting to preserve them on the journey back to Marsheim. It was wild that they had racked up so many heads that he'd almost run out. Siegfried and his team had gone out with two carriages and a whole barrel of salt. Using some quick mental math, he had brought back around a dozen heads to be turned in to the government...

"It was even worse out west, where the old local lords are still goin' strong," Siegfried went on. "I prodded one of 'em in the back and made 'em cough up to his misdeeds, and guess what we found? A shallow grave with a dozen-plus bodies in it"

"If this is all a joke, then it's really gone too far," I muttered. "We're at the boundary of the Empire and the western reaches. If trade stagnates, then so does the flow of coin. The provincial strongmen should know that."

The Trialist Empire of Rhine's chief asset was its land, so its highways were its arteries. They came in three varieties; the largest and most well maintained of these were the central highways. These highways weren't perfectly consistent throughout the Empire, but they were often well patrolled, with many checks performed along their lengths. It was almost unthinkable that something as dreadful as this was going on under their watch.

I leaned back in my chair and placed a hand on my forehead,

staring a hole in the ceiling.

The Empire and its satellite states composed a bloc economy, but foreign money was crucial. Out at the fringes of the Empire some traders might only come to restock or sell their goods, which meant that many of them only traded in their home currencies to avoid losing out on the conversion rate. This money was crucial for diplomacy, and so the government was actively trying to make it easier to exchange money. To think that people had cast that economic prosperity aside and turned to assaulting every caravan to drop by their doorstep? And in such numbers? This wasn't one person's flight of fancy.

"Where was worst?" I asked.

"All the places farther out. One of the cantons we stopped off at to restock was just *gone*. Judgin' about how it looked, it was probably the work of the Canton-Crusher."

I hadn't had a hangover, but I was feeling a serious headache come on regardless.

"What are the patrol knights doing..." I muttered.

"Most likely feastin' on a fat bribe. Guess what happened when we rounded up some knights under the local lord's employ and took them with us on patrol?"

"...They attacked you."

"Yeah, they attacked us, dammit!"

Both of us put our heads in our hands.

It was a perfectly reasonable act of self-defense, but cutting down an actual *knight* led to problems. Fortunately Siegfried had thought on his feet and realized that they couldn't allow any survivors to do them in. They had gotten rid of anyone who might spread rumor of any such confrontation, but gods this was going to be a pain to deal with.

We were in the right. We'd acted in self-defense and set right an abuse of the very trade routes commissioned by the first emperor. However, honor alone didn't put you on the law's good side.

The house of whoever the knights belonged to would grumble. The only concrete evidence belonged to these crooked roadhouses, which was akin to us having no evidence at all. It was almost

guaranteed that the other party would come at us with a ream of arguments casting us as the bad guys. If things really went south, then it was likely *we* would end up being the ones on trial and asked to explain ourselves.

Usually I would scold Siegfried to watch his dirty mouth, but in this case I wanted to mutter my own set of colorful curses.

"Dirty inns... Loss of law and order... And now Edward of Fimia has crushed his tenth canton. I bet his bounty will be going up," I said.

"We also sighted some busted caravans along the side of the highway," said Siegfried. "Everything of value was gone, but weirdly enough, there were no signs of a struggle. It looked like the women's throats were slit in their sleep and the men were left stark naked."

"The Femme Fatale is having fun too, it seems."

I could feel my headache turning into a full-on migraine. The three terrors of Ende Erde were foul crooks who each had a bounty of at least one hundred drachmae on their heads. Although we had brought an end to the Infernal Knight, the other two, Edward the Canton-Crusher and the Femme Fatale, were still at large. Neither of them liked to work out in the open. Instead, they weaseled their way into groups to do their research before killing every last witness. They were sneaky and they were still on the loose.

It tugged at the corner of my brain to hear that they were both moving once more, and at the same time too.

"How troubling..." I said. "It was meant to be an easy, generous payday."

"Erich?" Sieg ventured. "You really didn't know anything...did you?"

"Of course not, Siegfried! Do I look like the sort of man to knowingly send you off into danger?"

"You do."

Oof... Even I felt the damage from that immediate reply. I honestly couldn't remember ever having done something so cruel to my comrade. *And hey, Kaya? Are you turning away with a hand over your mouth out of kindness for me? There's not much point when I*

can tell you're laughing anyway...

"Well, I'm not. I swear it on the gods. Heck, I'll even swear it on the glory of my blade."

"You can swear it on my whiskers and fuzzy li'l tail!"

"Holy—?!"

The sudden proclamation caused Siegfried to sit up from his chair and almost drop his bowl. I was able to switch off my own personal alarm because Margit wasn't on guard and because I recognized the voice.

In the corner of the kitchen was Schnee, dressed in one of the barmaid uniforms for the Snoozing Kitten.

Where did she get this one from?

"Good morning to you too, Snowy Fraulein," I said. "Announcing your presence like that is bad for my heart. I'd prefer it if you'd stop."

"Can ya really blame a gal for comin' runnin' to her own defense at the sound of her best client chewin' her out for poor intel?"

The agitated swishing of her tail was a dead giveaway that she was mightily pissed.

"Ya don't need me ta tell ya that things ain't exactly peaceful around here," Schnee went on. "I also went ta the effort of compilin' a record of the worst offenders. All other info has been kept under wraps, I promise ya."

Schnee placed the cups of red tea from her tray upon the table with the grace expected of the finest maid. It seemed like she actually was doing her job while undercover today. When she'd finished, she took the tray and held it close to her. Her whole posture indicated her displeasure.

"Now, I got a pretty big network, but its coverage ain't perfect when you're all the way out at the ends of the ends."

Even Schnee's dialect had warped around her bad mood. She sat down at the table with her own cup as if this was always the plan and pulled out a map from an inside pocket.

"Now, I told you that these places were fishy, did I not?"

"Yeah, but they were small fry..."

"Which is why it's pretty stinkin' strange that you lucked out as

big as you did with this one."

The spot that Schnee was pointing to with a sharp claw was the grand prize that Siegfried had chanced upon; a travelers' town that wasn't filled with bandits insomuch as bloodthirsty murderers.

"When I did my research, the ones under the jurisdiction of the local lords, reformed or otherwise, weren't kickin' up any kinda fuss. Yet you had ta deal with quite the hullaballoo. Did anything come across your mind?"

"Hmm... Lessee. 'Ugh, this royally sucks. Why the hell did they have to do this when I was in town.'"

With his head still in his hands and face still planted onto the table, Siegfried scratched at his scalp as he muttered. I sent him a silent prayer. I wanted him to know that thanks to his great efforts, he had saved some lives down the line. He had every right to be proud and focus on the positives and not the negatives, in my eyes.

"Now, I got some news hot off the press for ya."

"I'll take it. Name your price and I'll pay," I said.

"You really got no sense for barterin'... But sure. Lowest prices around," Schnee said. She evidently seemed annoyed that I wouldn't even dare say a price lower than the first she gave, and today was no different as I handed over her usual twenty-five librae. River ports were the holy land for traders and barterers, and I imagined that Schnee had her own personal pride when it came to her sales too.

"We're seein' more and more knights scarperin' from their positions," Schnee said. "You got smaller fry like Sir Wiereck and Sir Ersch, but then you got bigger folk like Sir Bauffe, also known as the former Duke Vaudenie."

"Scarpering? Not referring to them changing their allegiance or running off in the night, but..."

"They wrote formal letters and left their liege's service."

Now this was odd.

I wasn't implying that knights leaving their employ was strange or anything. It was as normal as anything for people to simply run out on their masters if they were particularly unhappy. Indeed, sometimes people flew the coop because they suddenly realized that

they had simply lost any joy in the world at large.

What was odd was seeing so many knights in the same region hand in their two weeks' notice, so to speak. Weirder still was that even Sir Bauffe, who had once been a duke for the local lords and had since absconded to the Imperial side to receive a knighthood, had left his position. This wasn't like the last shogunate where samurai left just on the whims of the day; I could sense that there was a bigger political plot at play here.

Smooth-talking the backstabbers and forming secret plans was the regular path toward war, but I was surprised to see that it was being carried out this brazenly. If it were me, I would keep things under wraps for as long as humanly possible, then get the people I'd sweet-talked to turn traitor right at the last possible moment. There was nothing more terrifying than a betrayal you never saw coming. I had played enough games where I'd dropped my guard around backers I thought I could trust, only for a clash to break out when the attack came from within the house.

I expected that there was some reason they weren't doing this. It was possible that the Empire were trying to rile up the local lords, but I could go on guessing forever. You could never tell what surprises Ende Erde had in store.

"This whole mess has meant that the pro-Empire folk's administrative control has worsened. This rash of thievin' roadhouses and other such malfeasance are proof enough of that."

"Yeah, you said it..."

I glanced over at Kaya, who said with a smile that the heads were still splendidly preserved.

"For the most part our only option was to salt them, but I used a special spell for the heads still in their helmets."

The sharp divide between the sweet image of this young woman, smiling in her chartreuse robe, and the terrifying things that spilled from her lips gave me whiplash.

Just as Siegfried was constantly improving, our herbalist had grown too—both in terms of her skills and in a literal sense. Kaya had shot up in height and you could hear Sieg's grumbling when they stood near one another. She had garnered the attention of

many men, not just for her irreplaceable skill as a mage, but also for her looks, which her robes had made a valiant but clearly doomed effort to contain. Her face had always had a quiet and gentle sort of charm to it, but in the passing years it had developed a more womanly beauty and an alluring fullness. But she still possessed that unshakable inner resolve that had driven her to follow Siegfried's path. Kaya was a strong-willed and beautiful woman.

I supposed this was what had fired up Siegfried into letting the bandits attack him so that he could punish them for their impudence. Women were terrifying creatures, that was for sure.

As for her skills as an herbalist, they'd grown with the rest of her. Her concoctions had improved so much that I felt a shiver crawl down my spine when I got the chance to see just how useful they were in action. All the field testing she'd been able to do in real combat had led her to refine her approach by leaps and bounds.

So long as the cut was clean and relatively fresh, one of Kaya's specialist blends could reattach a severed finger. This was a level of skill that most magia couldn't hope to replicate. As I watched her brew up her various battle-ready potions, I felt that they more than made up for her inability to formulate spells on a whim.

Our herbalist's work had borne fruit this time around as well. With how well-preserved she'd said the heads were, it would be easy to identify who was who. If we were lucky, then the knight in question who had eloped would be among their number. I wasn't looking forward to it, but I made a mental note to check in on the heads later.

"Hmm, lots of elements that don't sit right with me," I said. "Were there any casualties?"

"None for us Fellows," Sieg said. "But there were some ruby-reds who'd come sniffin' from who knows where for a piece of the action. I told 'em to watch out, but three of them went out during the night for some fun and didn't come back alive. Then there were some travelers who joined us, thinkin' we were merchants; they got hurt, but nothing that'll bother 'em for too long. I guess for us there were a few small injuries, but nothing to come home cryin' about."

"I treated everyone who got hurt, and their conditions are stable

now," Kaya added. "Our people only got off with scratches, really."

"Well done," I said. "I'll tell the Fellows they did a good job later."

It was good we'd come out in one piece, but what a pain. This couldn't be brushed aside with an "all's well that ends well." This whole affair could affect our reputation. Not only that, I felt truly bad for the boneheaded ruby-reds who'd got caught up in this crap job and lost their lives.

Siegfried didn't expand much on the battle aside from his remarks that he'd had a terrible time of it all, but I knew he took good care of his Fellows and followed through when the situation demanded it. I could imagine that he must have had quite the fearsome encounter if he was also working to protect those weaker than him. I needed to pull my weight too; otherwise it would make the Fellowship look bad.

"Siegfried, what are your upcoming plans?"

"You manage the schedules; you should know best of all. This was a big gig, so I'll be takin' five days off."

With this job done, I knew he wouldn't have anything on, but it was polite to double-check these things.

"Where are you going?" Margit asked lethargically as I stood up once I'd polished off my stew.

"I would say that I would be going to see our mediator who got us this job, but that won't do. I'll be heading straight to the Association manager herself."

I needed to head back to my room to get a quill and some paper. It was time to pen a strongly worded letter.

[Tips] The Empire has developed and put a lot of money into travelers' towns and roadhouses, as well as other services along the nation's highways. In the peripheries where uprisings are likely, they not only expend more of their budget but also prepare inns which can easily be accessed by merchants and horses.

There was something that I had been thinking about ever since I had realized the functionality of Limelit. While it was important to

uphold one's own image, it was also important not to impinge on someone else's. While it might be pretty damn cool to bust down the door without an appointment and make your reasonable demands, the other person will simply think you lack class.

In concrete terms, it was important to respect form and customs. I wasn't in the sort of lighthearted world where I could call the king "old man" and *not* have my head chopped off.

"That looks about right," I said, reviewing my letter. "Hey, Margit...? Ah, you're not in any fit state. Kaya, could you lend me a hand with editing this?"

I was in my usual seat at the corner of the mess hall—by habit more than anything else—and I handed our learned herbalist my letter. Lately, thanks to my modest fame, I'd pulled in a modest crop of experience without having to so much as lift a finger. I'd used it to upgrade my Palatial Speech to High Palatial Speech and then cranked it up to Scale V. I'd already been a good enough correspondent not to step on any noble toes, but now I could really start throwing my weight around rhetorically.

All the same, no one was infallible, and another pair of eyes was crucial. In my own case, I needed someone to analyze what I'd done with the expectation I'd messed up somewhere. I needed more than two hands to count the number of times an unholy fumble had led not only me but the rest of my party to a swift demise.

Those past tragic sessions replayed in my mind's eye. That time I'd screwed up a heal so badly that I'd ended up personally killing our one tank; that night when I'd rolled a D100 and chanced upon the *wrong* idea during an idea check—crucial if we wanted to reach the happy ending—and ended up losing my humanity; that merciless time that our whole party had forgotten that tiny line of dialogue and left a key person behind as we merrily headed into the final dungeon without them. I felt another headache coming on.

"It's well written," Kaya said. "There are even a number of expressions that I have trouble parsing."

"I thought this would be good enough, considering a noble would be reading this, but if they think I'm trying to be a bit of an upstart, maybe I should play up the commoner angle and dumb it down a

bit...”

“Hey, man, go on the offensive, why not?” Sieg chimed in. “That’s expected of the Great Goldilocks, no?”

“You really know how to hit a guy where it hurts, Siegfried... When have I ever been high and mighty, huh?” I said with a pout, but he didn’t take the bait and turned away with a huff. I didn’t get him sometimes.

Whatever the case, if there weren’t any glaring errors, then I could just send it as is.

“Oh! Good morning, dear magician,” Shymar said.

“And good morning to you too, Missus,” Mika replied. “Could I trouble you for a cup of red tea?”

Just as I was packing up my letter, a pleasantly clear and polite voice came ringing through the room, bearing no trace of last night’s bender. The person in question came walking in, running a hand through his hair—which was far more tousled than it was during his agender periods.

“Morning, Mika,” I said. “Sleep well?”

“Morning, Erich. I did, thanks to the wonderful room you showed me. I felt as if I slept on a cloud— Oh? Who might these young ladies be?”

Smartly dressed in an immaculate robe, Mika glanced over at Kaya and Schnee, who he rightly realized hadn’t been at the party last night. I was impressed at his attentiveness—a handy knock-on effect of all those high society functions.

“It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance, my fellow mage. My name is Kaya of Illfurth.”

“And I’m Schnee, info broker for ol’ Goldilocks Erich here. A pleasure!”

“And it is a pleasure to meet you two lovely ladies as well,” Mika replied. “I am Mika. A student of the Imperial College of Magic, and also Erich’s friend. He kindly recommended I stay here.”

“Oh! Erich has spoken much of you,” Kaya said. “You are far more splendid than even his stories.”

“The poets have spoken of you too, Merciful Sapling. Although I must say, meeting you in person, the world’s poets surely need more

practice—all their words fall short of the truth of you”

“What a flatterer you are. I pale in comparison to you. And I must say that I am surprised to see that Erich’s descriptions were nothing short of the truth.”

Our party’s healer gave a pleasant and ladylike smile, and in return the genteel debuffer played out such pleasantries that an onlooker might feel obliged to start gossiping. Both of them were so committed to remaining on form that it stood as a spectacle all on its own. Seeing beautiful people smiling together was a wonderful sight indeed.

For Siegfried’s part, he turned his face away in plain displeasure at seeing his partner so deeply complimented by someone else. It was uncouth of him, but I couldn’t say I didn’t understand how he felt. I decided to let it slide. I didn’t want to get too involved either; I was pretty certain Kaya was doing it on purpose. I couldn’t remember when it was, but Margit and I had dropped in on them at the tavern in the past and overheard her say “Dee is so cute when he’s jealous” with the most salacious expression on her face that I had ever seen. Twin plumes of steam had practically shot out of her ears.

Margit and I, who were sitting next to her, realized in an instant, “Ah, yeah, this ain’t good.”

What had happened to this pure young magician who had followed her childhood friend out of their hometown out of worry for him? Maybe nothing—she had always been good at knowing which of Sieg’s buttons to push, and maybe city life had merely furnished her with new means to express tendencies she’d always had.

At this present moment, Kaya was demonstrating a talent for manipulation so prodigious I could only stand back and applaud. She’d used these same skills to light a flame of envy under Sieg so fierce he’d admitted his feelings for her in the first place, bringing years of waffling to an end. It was a good thing that Kaya wasn’t born into too highbrow a family. I could tell that, in the right circumstances, she could bring a nation to its knees if she so wished.

Good luck, Sieg, you’ve got a tough journey ahead of ya.

“I’m not interrupting some kind of discussion among your party,

am I?” Mika asked.

“When have I ever turned you away from a table, old chum? Enjoy some breakfast with your tea. It’s good!”

“If you’re sure, then I’ll indulge.”

I glared at Siegfried, shutting him down before he could yell “Who said we were a party?!” and brought over a chair for Mika. He gave a small bow and sat down. He looked like the guest of honor at a birthday party or something.

After Mika asked the missus for some breakfast, I asked him what his plans were for the day, to which he replied that as his work hadn’t started yet, he had some free time. He had sent his familiar ahead when he’d worked out when he was due to arrive in Marsheim, but both the local administration and the branch school said they were busy at the moment, and he could take it easy for the time being. It was a magnanimously slapdash response. Translated into common speak, they were saying: “Please give us three to five days to prepare things for you.” This kind of loose attitude toward one’s itinerary was typical of nobles. Still, I was glad Mika was getting the break; he clearly needed it.

“I had a number of things I wished to ask you, Erich,” Mika said after his breakfast arrived and he took a sip of the fragrant tea. “How does one become an adventurer? It pains me to say that although I received generous travel and research funds, I don’t have any means of supporting my daily upkeep.”

My chum gave a tired sigh. His sad expression was incredible—in the presence of a more hifalutin crowd, I’d expect a whole queue of noble girls eager to become his patron to form in front of him. I felt my heart twinge. What a terrifying education my old chum was getting. Mika’s looks had always been eye-catching, even when we were younger and he had a more ephemeral appeal, but age had only amplified his bewitching powers. The way he could milk that stormy, angst-ridden mien in public was borderline obscene.

“Well, I’m paid enough to not starve, but unfortunately the College is all too stringent when it comes to its students. I’m sure this won’t be convincing, but my purse isn’t much fatter than it was when you were in Berylin.”

“Then how’d ya get those fancy duds?” my comrade said with a glare.

“Ah, I didn’t pay for these,” my old chum said with a far-off expression and a self-effacing laugh. He glanced at me with a look that said “You know where these came from, right?”

Yes... I did... There was no way that a few years could undo two centuries of depravity left to age in the dark. It seemed that in my absence, Mika’d had the misfortune of becoming the new favorite dress-up doll of a wraith whom we counted as a mutual acquaintance. I hadn’t noticed before, but looking at it now, the robe wasn’t quite to Mika’s usual tastes. He preferred a looser shape that allowed ease of movement—very much a function-over-form kind of guy. The piece he had on was heavily embroidered, engineered to scream “Look, I’m the scion of a well-to-do household!” The stitching was the same color as the fabric, so it wasn’t too gaudy, but it was obvious even this subtle display of wealth wasn’t to my chum’s tastes.

And yet, as I looked even closer, I could see that the embroidery actually formed magic circles, imbued with formulae that were out of Mika’s wheelhouse. They prevented dust and dirt from settling, as well as protecting it from sun damage. It would never be harmed by daily wear and tear.

That and all the splendid silk—clearly imported through the Eastern Passage—made it a top-notch wardrobe piece. Even if a farmer sold their house and land, they wouldn’t be able to afford even a rag of the stuff. If I was correct in my assumption that the dyed embroidery was made from the same silk, then the raw materials alone were mind-bogglingly expensive. Top that off with the fine work of seamstresses under noble employ and a vision crafted by a trendy designer, and you had something that was many times the value of its constituent parts. If even that wasn’t enough, with all those formulae cooked up by that wraith, head of her cadre with her absolutely broken skill set, I expected many nobles with mountains of gold would covet it. Not that it would help—this was fitted to Mika’s measurements, so only a scant few would ever be able to wear it.

“It’s not as if I can sell it on. Talk about troubling,” Mika said with a shake of the head.

“Yes, I doubt any secondhand clothes shop across the entirety of the globe would be able to buy it off you,” I replied.

With me out of the picture, it was easy to imagine that Lady Leizniz’s twisted visions had put my old chum through the wringer. It was a good thing that she didn’t have quite the tastes that could be found in a certain type of book—similar to TRPG rulebooks in that they had few pages but were mighty expensive—where the models within had swimsuits that *just* about hid everything as long as they didn’t move, but I knew that being put on display and being forced to model clothes all day was not an enjoyable experience. The struggle only deepened when a portrait was taken once dress-up time had finally ended.

All the same, the outfit suited him well. He was good-looking, and I could feel my mental exhaustion lifting just by looking at him...

“Ow?!”

Suddenly I felt a sharp pain in my shin, harder and more pointed than any errant mensch foot. Margit had kicked me.

“Forgive me,” she said. “I was swinging my legs in a moment of whimsy. It seems like I might have hit you.”

I glanced over and saw Margit, still slumped on the table, peering out at me from behind crossed arms. Apparently I had pulled an unsavory enough expression to warrant punishing... I made a mental note to mind myself in the future.

“Are you okay, pal?”

“Quite, chum. Now, then—you wanted to become an adventurer?”

“Yes, merely to support my daily expenses. I would rather not have gruel for every meal.”

Gruel was your textbook poverty meal. This wheat-based dish had once been the functional signature dish of the empire that had stood here before the loose federation of nation-states from which in turn the Trialist Empire of Rhine had sprung. It was sad that it had been demoted to this level as the food culture of this land had developed. It was cheap and it filled your stomach, but it was

simplicity personified. Requiring any sort of flavoring or seasoning to be mildly enjoyable, I had no more desire to see my friend relegated to such paltry, purely functional fare than he did. He might have been eighteen, but he still had room to grow. It was important he was well-fed.

"Then the Fellowship would be glad to have you," I said. "I'll send a letter of recommendation to the Association."

"Thank you. I'm uncertain how useful I'll be, but that would be wonderful."

"Don't be silly. You can never have enough magicians in this line of work. In fact, I bet people would crowd you and start asking what they could offer you even if you didn't want to."

"Ha ha, is that right? I wouldn't mind that if it were you crowding me... But I suppose it will be fun to indulge myself on my own terms this time around."

Leaning on one hand, Mika gave an enchanting smile.

It was an encouraging suggestion. A mage, and an oikodomurge in training at that, would be able to show off their skills when it came to protecting a caravan. Not only could he fix up rough roads, he could turn the ground to slush under our enemies' feet. With his expertise with lumber, he could also fix up a broken carriage axle in no time. There would be almost nothing to fear on the roads with him around.

With Mika in our team, we could charge double...no, four times the going rate for a bodyguard gig, and even that would be a steal. Depending on the size of the parade, people would be happy to pay seven or eight times the usual rate. If Mika was offering to help, then I would be more than happy to oblige.

While it usually embarrassed me a little, now it was time to whip out the good deeds of Goldilocks to brush aside some of the more annoying parts of adventuring life, like having to start from soot-black. While I personally couldn't grant him a higher rank, if word got around that he had my seal of approval, then it wouldn't even matter what his actual rank was. I didn't like standing out in a bad way, but I wouldn't be in this business at all if I wasn't inclined to leverage what little power I had intelligently where it counted. It

would be a waste to *not* use that sort of leverage, right? When one's connections make a session easier, no one hesitates to grease some palms. If this had been a certain perfectly splendid utopia with absolutely no mutants or traitors or horrible systemic failures perpetuated by a hierarchy of enforced suspicion superficially resembling the Association's own system of ranks, I'd have licked any set of boots to come my way (clearance permitting). I wouldn't even be borrowing someone else's might this time, so what was holding me back from flexing a little?

Of course, I'd have to show some forethought to ensure I didn't end up overreliant on my rep. If I was labelled a cocky upstart, then I could see my character sheet being ripped up by some deadly enemy NPC. I needed to keep a close eye on my limits.

Now then, if Mika had time, that warranted a slight change of plans for the day.

"Welcome to our Fellowship, Mika. How's about I show you around our beautiful home of Marsheim?"

My old chum had come all this way, it was time to show him where I had chosen to make my haunt.

[Tips] It is a general rule that all adventurers start at soot-black, but with a strong recommendation from a senior adventurer as well as the worthy capabilities, a fledgling adventurer may start at a higher rank. However, this decision lies in the hands of the manager. Mere strength or influence does not grant an expedited promotion.

With breakfast eaten and my letter penned, Mika and I headed out to do a bit of sightseeing in Marsheim. Although the city was big, it was built to be a frontline outpost on the Empire's edge, and so there wasn't actually that much to go and see.

"This is Bloodsoaked Lane," I said.

"There's nothing here..." Mika replied.

He wasn't wrong. To be more accurate, this was the site of the former Bloodsoaked Lane.

"Once upon a time, Sir Heidrich Walter von Knapfstein rallied his

troops in battle and lost his life and the lives of his entire family here. Their victory is why this lane still remains."

"Oh, there is something—a small cenotaph."

This street had quite the troubling name, but now it was paved—albeit the quality was slightly shoddy—and at the end of the street was one of the city's many walls. In the past, this neglected wall had been part of the leading edge of the city's defenses. Here, Justus de A Dyne and his troops were repelled in their attempt to reclaim Marsheim, and a team of fifty indigenous mages used their Great Work polemurgy to create an eight-meter hole to entrap them.

If Justus's troops had managed to break through this wall, then they would have found a poorly defended inner city. To prevent this outcome, Sir Knapfstein, who was on the rear guard, came to provide support. Through a small breach in the wall, the two sides battled, resulting in over six thousand casualties. Sir Knapfstein and his family perished in battle alongside two hundred of his troops, and many hundreds more who came to back them up, but their honorable defeat and their victory against the force of local lords that outnumbered them many times over became a legend.

All the same, people lived and worked here just as much as they sheltered in its shadow, and so the damage was repaired, and all the gory history tucked away and memorialized with a solitary cenotaph in a quiet corner.

"Um, Erich? Are all the sightseeing spots like this?"

"You catch on quickly, old chum," I said, puffing out my chest. In return, Mika placed a hand to his forehead to suggest he shouldn't have expected anything else.

Marsheim may have been the regional capital with an official population in the tens of thousands—not to mention the hundreds of thousands of people who made their home here off the record—but that was about as good as it got.

Nothing we had measured up to the grand sights of Berylin's Imperial Art Gallery or the Grand Theater. Any historical battle sites would only be a weak point if they'd been left as they were. If you wanted to trace Marsheim's history, then you would have to find the small monuments on street corners like this or listen to the old folks

who still had their history straight dredge up the old sagas *ad nauseam*.

"I think most places are like this, to be honest," Mika said. "Maybe I shouldn't say this as an oikodomurge, but it's the Rhinian way to standardize everything."

"Now that you mention it, the only real differences out here in the sticks are the materials and some decorative features. The urban planning is pretty much the same."

"I had heard that Imperial theaters and bathhouses were built the same across the country, but it still caught me off guard when I was making my rounds yesterday how familiar it all felt."

The Trialist Empire of Rhine was a shameless bureaucratic technocracy devised from its very inception by a textbook neat freak. Our urban construction always followed a fixed template. Since the national sense of taste had largely followed suit in its fondness for neat rows of cohesively designed buildings, the only places where architects could get up to anything more idiosyncratic were the art galleries, libraries, baths, memorial buildings, et cetera.

Since Marsheim was built well into the Empire's history and with the purpose of quelling the local lords out here, it was no surprise that there was little to no architectural tourism worth doing here. Even the city's terraced structure, which appeared to have spread naturally, was designed so that each area reinforced and supported the others. If one district fell, the others would remain just as secure as before. Although Marsheim looked shabby and was shoddy in places, its frame was strong and sturdy.

After all, if the Empire had put up any big swinging-dick edifices, you could expect some local lord to scrape together some Great Work polemurgy to blast it down within the month. In a world where magic could outclass heavy cannon, a tall building was just a big target. It kept the skylines of strategically vital metropolises like ours about half the height of Berylin's. Even the towers, the rare few features that broke past the horizon, were designed to serve military purposes in a crisis. Of the scant few legitimately *huge* structures, the largest of them stood just shy of and barely distinct from the city walls themselves. The people of Marsheim, and in particular its civic

planners, understood all too well the legacy of rubble and blood their home was quite literally built on top of, and would one day no doubt be leveled and built over itself.

"Which means that Adrian Imperial Plaza..."

"It's just a rustic but charming fountain and a few flowerbeds that aren't tended to often enough."

"Right... I know I dream of becoming an architect, but it seems that Marsheim isn't a place for freedom of expression."

The trouble with Marsheim was that, for all its freewheeling frontier attitude, the pressures of history, geography, and politics didn't leave a lot of leeway to *enjoy* that freedom.

Mika lightly stamped on one of the paving slabs; it tilted up off the ground in return. In the years since they had been laid, time had weakened the join, meaning the slab could be easily removed if you stepped on it wrong. It wasn't rare to see sights like these. It cost money and manpower to maintain, and the local oikodomurges had more important things to tend to, like the main roads and the sewage system. It came as no surprise that there wasn't the time to focus on more aesthetic things like this.

"As someone who spent their days poring over the 'vain castle in the capital of vanity,' this isn't all that encouraging."

"Don't say that, old chum! The noble quarter is somewhat better."

Which was true enough, if you ignored the fact that with half of the residences lying empty and the other half only inhabited during the social seasons, the whole quarter was a ghost town, with all the eerie atmosphere that implied.

"Oh! Talking of nobles, I just remembered something. Could you have a look at this for me?" Mika said.

My chum pulled out a thick letter from the inner pocket of his robe. His clothes weren't formfitting at all, but the only way that such a thick wad would go unnoticed was with a little bit of space expansion magic. The manipulation of the relationship between space and time was one of First Light's deepest secrets, yet here it had been gimmicked away into the robe of someone from another cadre entirely. Yet another reminder of the unfathomable nature of that wretched wraith. If someone else had done this, they'd have

paid for this treason by spilling their own guts, surely...

"And what is that?" I asked.

"Invitations for tea parties," Mika asked. "I received them when they found out I'd been shipped out to Marsheim for my fieldwork."

"Shipped out? Your prejudice is showing, old chum."

"Is it now?"

I'd rather he not treat my chosen haunt as some sort of penal colony. It might be a little rough around the edges, but good folk lived here. I'd grown to like the old place. As they said: Home is where you make it.

"Anyway, the letters say they're from illustrious relatives with whom I have some passing acquaintance and nobles inviting me to use their retainers' manors; still, I fear I'm not too clued in on Marsheim's aristocratic scene."

"Let's have a look-see."

I took the bundle from Mika and found that most of the names belonged to nobles and knightly houses that weren't all too surprising. It was easy to see that they all wished to play the game of hereditary politics to make connections with the new oikodomurge in town.

"I can't say I recommend any of the names here," I said. "One of these houses screwed up badly with some river management, so they would chop off one of their arms to get an oikodomurge in their pocket. Try staying the night—you'll end up as someone's new son or daughter before long."

"I wouldn't like that," Mika said, with a visible shiver. I was sure his arms hugging his body were covered in goose pimples.

The thing was, I wasn't even exaggerating. Nobles loved to preach the virtues of chastity and purity, so much so that some managed to weaponize it. If a capable person showed up, then they would not hesitate to spread rumors that said person had "deflowered" their son or daughter and subsequently force an engagement by default. I couldn't begin to fathom how many young men and women in the capital had been made into game pieces by such ghoulish means.

"I'm not confident I'm qualified to become anyone's parent quite

yet."

"How strange, chum—me too."

We exchanged a glance and both laughed. What a funny coincidence that for all we'd been through, our courage faltered on that front.

"Oh my, to think that the gallant and brave Goldilocks Erich, sung about in tales as a fearless hero, would find fatherhood his greatest foe. I think a little song could be spun out of that."

"Enough of that. Just think about it—doesn't the idea of being responsible for a whole other life, start to finish, put the fear of all the gods in you? My career could kill me and orphan the poor kid at any moment! It would be irresponsible to the extreme."

"I find myself in quite the same bind, old pal. One slipup reinforcing the wrong strut and I could find myself squashed flat on the job. It's just not a gamble I'm comfortable taking before I retire!"

Mika and I cackled as we elbowed each other with our little jibes, and we came to agree that it would be best for Mika to continue staying at the Snoozing Kitten. The missus seemed to have taken a shine to him—his plate had one wurst extra, which was impressive considering such favors were costly. He hadn't yet been tainted with the epicurean tastes befitting someone of the upper crust, so he would no doubt grow used to a cheap lodging house by noble standards. On a personal note, I didn't want to be fighting in my old chum's corner regarding whether he'd had *relations* with a noble heir or not.

"If I'm to be staying there, I'll need to earn my keep. Say, old chum—or should I call you 'Boss' like the others?"

"Whoa, I'll have to stop you there. Nothing could put me off more!"

And so my irreplaceable friend joined my party as a mage; the worst nightmare of any and all front liners. It didn't do much to change the fact that the party lineup was still kind of whack without a priest on our side, but it was all good; Kaya was kind of sub-classing into a healer, after all. All the same, if I were the GM running this campaign, I would ask the PCs if they wanted to reconsider their party balance.

"'I aid myself, and in so doing shame my friend; faith is born of mutual aid.' Right?" I said, quoting a philosopher from the old Southern Sea.

"Wow, you've picked out another obscure quotation." Mika said. Mika replied with a quotation of his own in kind: "Well then: 'In the shadows I shall support my friend; in the light, I shall sing his praises.'"

"It sure is reassuring to have you here, old chum."

"Likewise, old pal."

I smiled awkwardly at our overblown routine, and he returned a smile of his own. Ahh, nothing was more irreplaceable than a friend whose core would always stay the same.

[Tips] There are countless maxims and aphorisms that dig into the nature of friendship. However, there are few such maxims fit to teach you how to engage with a friend of your own.

"Huh?! I'm not a member of the clan?!"

The exclamation rang through the tavern during the celebration of Yorgos's first successful job as an adventurer. Such parties were common with the Fellowship. If a decent job was completed by a capable individual, then a sufficiently grand party ought to celebrate that. It was part of my own personal MO that we celebrated the first gig completed by a trialing or official member—that went even for jobs that weren't typically "adventurous" like delivering valuable goods for a favorite caravan client.

The one who had yelled just a second ago was Dietrich. She had sat with us at our table as if it were the most natural thing and I remembered that I hadn't asked her *why* she'd come to Marsheim.

"Well... You never said anything about joining," I replied.

"Come on, wasn't that obvious?!" she said.

I'd been half stood up, ready to do a toast for Yorgos, when she'd cornered me. Folk at other tables were grinning at me and the chaos unfurling. It didn't feel good.

"You haven't been to any of our training sessions."

"Yeah, but look at my weapon!" Dietrich said, gesturing at her halberd.

I didn't need her to point that out to me, but the thing was that although we were called the Fellowship of the *Blade*, not all of our members actually used swords. Our second-in-command, Siegfried, was a skilled user of the spear; Kaya was a pure mage. Among our members, some preferred their main weapon to have a longer haft, like a spear or club, whereas others were more suited to scouting and had taken Margit as their teacher.

"Our policy is that unless you're a real specialist, you need to rise and rest with the trial members," I said. "Etan, has she ever been up before the morning bell?"

"Oh, uh... Just...the once," Etan said, awkwardly. I gave Dietrich a firm stare and she kept her drink back firmly in her hands as she stepped backward.

"B-But I'm tough! I'm probably the second toughest one here, after you."

Holy moly, she still really needs some sort of education...

"Listen, we're not just a group of muscleheads who pride themselves on being the toughest bastards around. We're adventurers."

"Right..."

"In other words, we're a military unit," I went on. "So, then, Dietrich. Are you telling me a proud housecarl of the Hildebrand tribe doesn't need to train and can catch some Zs at her leisure?"

"No..."

I continued to pester Dietrich, to which she mustered an awkward, faltering defense, and said that if she wanted to join us, then she needed to get up at five o'clock for training *and* start working. I wasn't asking much. She had survived well enough until I met her, and in the years since I left she had been with Rudolf. To top it off, zentaurs could get by on very little sleep; I was hardly making an impossible request.

"My plans for a life of luxury...ruined..."

"What was that?"

"Nothing..."

I decided to be the bigger person and ignored her cheek before giving my toast. Everyone clashed their drinks together, evidently unwilling to wait any longer, before they downed them. Soon the discussion moved to praise for Yorgos's first job well done.

"Man, who'da thought you'd be such a hit," Mathieu said.

"Hah, that's 'cause his mug could frighten even the rowdiest bunch in the caravan! Right, bud?" Etan went on.

"Thanks," Yorgos replied.

Mathieu was staring into the middle distance as Etan slapped the newbie on the back with a proud expression. It seemed that the job had been a roaring success and Yorgos had been given a little tip.

In the Fellowship, we may have placed our sword skills first, but our strongest weapon after that was trust and honesty. None of our Fellows were so foolish as to fall into avarice—all the way down to the newbies. The whole induction process was designed to sift out folks like that. Our reputation meant that we were trusted with bodyguard and delivery work with caravans that carried valuable stock, like the glass products that came in from the west.

Caravans and merchants wouldn't bother trying to haggle if they knew we were on the job. With us standing watch, we could thin out the fools with sticky fingers. The fame and trust that the Fellowship had earned meant that we could give better jobs to our newbies.

When we got the call for this job, we were told that they could pay two librae a head. Considering that most soot-black adventurers could only hope to earn around fifty assarii after scurrying around for a good half day, the money our newcomers could earn for two to four hours of work was incomparable. On the flip side, we required our newbies to supply the sort of quality expected of that pay scale.

"But man... What do I *do* for work?" Dietrich said, placing her hands out in front of her while Yorgos was a bit overwhelmed by his warm welcome. They were both newbies, but I had made a mental note to allow her to become a proper member of the Fellowship if she managed to keep up a good job for at least two weeks.

"Yeah, jobs for zentaurs are a bit limited," I said.

"Just so you know, I'm not pulling any carriages. I've got my pride. My tutelary spirit would never forgive me."

"I'm not that cruel. I'll give you bodyguard and watchman gigs. If you're lucky, then there might be one here and there where you can show off your spear skills."

It was my job as the boss to think about how to best use my people, and I wanted to let Dietrich know that I knew as much. As I was reassuring her, I remembered something.

"Oh yeah. What happened to Rudolf in the end, anyway?"

"Got married. Just like that."

"Seriously?"

"You'll listen to my tale of woe, won't you?"

I could sense it would be a drag, but before I could flee, she slung an arm over my shoulders and caught me dead in the face with a tale like a shotgun blast of grievances. Apparently after I'd parted ways with Dietrich, she and Rudolf had headed to the Old Town. They had formed a little mercenary group with the same gang that had signed on to help out with the elopement in the first place. Unfortunately Rudolf and his buddies were simply too good-hearted. They were terrible at negotiations and wouldn't speak up when payments were late—it was up to Dietrich to barrel her way through those sticking points.

"You had a rough time too, huh," I said.

"You bet I did! That bunch *always* let sob stories get the better of them! You keep your money and your poor bleeding heart separate! You don't know how long I spent drilling into them that we put our damn lives on the line and ought to get *paid* like it!"

Still, after three years working the mercenary angle, she'd polished her skills and the group had made a bit of a name for itself. Before long, Rudolf had caught the eye of a knight's family whose fat they'd pulled out of the fire before. They were only a small family, and they'd worked hard for their peerage, but they had been impressed by Rudolf's martial skill and said they would hire the entire group as their personal housecarls.

However, the knight's fourth daughter fell for Rudolf, drawn in by his genteel nature, and things moved apace without anyone getting much in edgewise. As a result, they moved up in the world as they found themselves the horsemen and foot soldiers of a knight's

family.

"I asked him if he was really happy with the situation," Dietrich said.

"Knowing him, he probably was weak to the allure of romance."

"Yup. Especially when it's a twelve-year-old kid clinging to him."

Yeah, that sounds like Rudolf, all right. Man was always a sucker for a charity case.

It made sense that the family would be wondering how to find a good husband for their fourth daughter at that age. It was suicide for him to swoop in to save the day like some kind of hero.

"Marriage in five seconds, huh..."

"Huh, why five seconds? But yeah, he caved real quick. I wonder if he remembered how last time had panned out for him."

The others apparently didn't think they were going to get a better chance to escape their station anytime this life, so they were more than happy to sign on. Rudolf couldn't resist that kind of pressure. They had once been under the employ of one of the Thirteen Knights; their three years on the road must have been tough if they were in such a hurry to get rehired.

"Anyway, I couldn't go along with that, so I left," Dietrich said.

"But he tried to persuade you not to leave. And he laid it on thick, at that."

"How'd you know?"

"Because you're a skilled warrior from the isles and a zentaur from a tribe of housecarls! How much would the family's rep have grown if you'd stayed behind? The knight's people would reevaluate their liege if he had such a capable warrior under his employ."

A knight's class was linked to the quality of his soldiers. One knight usually needed five horsemen and ten to fifteen footmen under him to be taken seriously—this was about as much as his budget and prestige would allow. However, if this limited budget was spent on one incredible powerhouse, a knight could find themselves ahead of the pack and their rivals panicking to bridge the gap. That was how valuable a powerful subordinate could be. If they performed well in one of the tournaments knight families held, then it would be easier for them to catch the attention of a noble and

earn their respect. A knight's honor was worth more than his life, and so they would resort to any means necessary to improve it.

In all honesty, I was impressed that Dietrich had managed to nope out of this situation safely.

"Well, I imagine they wanted to grant you the rank of retainer and a hereditary stipend of five drachmae. Right? With an extra ten drachmae up front, naturally."

"Wow, how'd you get it so accurate? Kinda creepy, to be honest..."

"Creepy?! Excuse you!"

"But c'mon—you really get how that family's bean counters think. That's the exact quote they gave me. Bunch of geeks who'd sooner spend the night with a stack of books than their wives—you understand those guys better than I ever will."

I almost forgot how rude Dietrich could be. First of all, I didn't appreciate being compared to a knight's bookkeeper. I was in charge of a count's finances for a while—couldn't us poor "bean counters" get our flowers for *once*, please?

"Anyway, I didn't wanna serve a poor house like that, but I felt bad taking the others away from that. It'd been three years, and I thought I'd gotten a ways stronger, so I thought it was about time to challenge you again. Though we both know how that ended up."

"Hey, don't be so glum. You really have gotten stronger. You pushed me to give it my all!"

"Huh? No, I didn't, you didn't even use any mag—"

"Oho, look, Dietrich! Your cup's empty!"

That was close! I managed to use the power of booze to silence her before she could say anything more. I needed to tell her later in private that I was keeping my magic and a certain love-starved sword a secret from my new friends. Although the former would leave people thinking I was just a bit of an asshole, the latter might poison my rep for good; nobody wanted to associate with a dude lugging around a sword *that* obviously cursed. If people fobbed me off because of it, I might actually cry. I wanted to keep the Craving Blade a secret for the rest of my life if I could.

Ignoring the scraping sound of protest in my brain, I made sure a

new drink was in Dietrich's hands and got to thinking about what I should do with her. I had just been thinking of setting up a little cavalry unit; maybe her timing was providence at work. Unfortunately, although Martyn was in charge of that and I'd drilled some basic horse riding into my Fellows, we hadn't yet made it viable. Dietrich was first-class cavalry herself, but she had little experience with leadership; I felt a bit wary placing her in that position. And anyway, after my little private lesson, Martyn had transformed into the Fellowship's most talented swordsman. I didn't want to confuse the whole hierarchy right now.

How troubling... If I didn't use her as cavalry, then the heckling would never stop—folks would complain that I was sitting on a goldmine of talent, and they'd be right. Things would be quick to solve if I could take her out on a bodyguard assignment with me, but that sort of job didn't come knocking any old day of the week. I also had the lingering worry that I didn't know what kind of chaos she might cause with time on her hands.

Just as I was mulling over it all, a pale figure entered the Snowy Silverwolf—Schnee in traveler's wear. She gave me a cheeky grin when she noticed that I'd clocked her, then weaved through the crowd toward me with her featherlight footsteps.

"Good news?" I said.

"Yup, from the manager herself," she replied.

I stopped forcing Dietrich's drink on her—with the angry complaint that "Zentaurs don't waste good booze by downing it in one gulp!"—and took the letter affixed with the Association manager's personal wax seal. Ever since that big job, Schnee had been pegged as our clan's official go-between, and so she would deliver letters like this—usually half were personal letters and the other half were official communiques.

I opened the letter and saw that although it was certainly good news, it wasn't the sort of thing that would make me pump my arm in joy. The only part that I could be genuinely happy about was that Lady Maxine had approved of Mika's affiliation under the Fellowship and he was specially gifted an instant promotion to amber-orange. I wasn't surprised about this decision, nor did I have any complaints.

Whereas Lady Maxine might have wondered why the new aspiring oikodomurge dispatched to town had connections to me and why he wanted to moonlight as an adventurer of all things, she wouldn't have any qualms at new muscle to help keep the peace.

Lady Maxine wasn't in the position—now or in the past—to ask for much. Some of the more unruly clans had settled down, but the local lords' frustrations were getting close to bubbling over. She didn't have the wherewithal to question the particulars if an upright new adventurer had turned up.

I actually had been a bit curious about this and had paid Schnee a modest fee to look into it. She had found out that Marsheim was going through a rash of adventurers gone missing on jobs out of town. Putting aside the matter of where she had sniffed out intel like that—I trusted her implicitly at this point—all I could do was speculate as to what the hell was going on. I was almost certain it had something to do with all those rogue roadhouses.

An adventurer couldn't be picky about shelter. My fellows in the biz had most likely bunked down in one crooked inn or another, never to return. Even though I couldn't do anything about it directly, that was something I couldn't abide by. I'd made my own countermeasures by spreading the word and advising folks to handle said crooks with extreme prejudice when they *did* turn up, but there were still too many elements that I didn't have a real handle on.

More skilled adventurers wouldn't suffer any losses—we weren't such fools as to trust the room key from any old inn—but it wouldn't be good for the new buds to be plucked before they could sprout. We didn't need a repeat of the events that gave us the One Cup Clan.

Our enemies knew that adventurers played their own role in keeping the peace. The tactic was smart—infuriatingly so. We were paid a pittance to clean up the region's messes, and without us the effects, big or small, would be seen before long. We could be supplemented, of course. However, our replacements had to come from somewhere—whether from families of the peerage or recruited from local cantons, the Empire would suffer the losses *somewhere*.

It was a simple fact that many small tragedies compounded into

crisis, but I really wished that this wasn't one of those situations clearly predicated on an intelligent, concerted effort to do wrong.

"This will be the first job in a while that'll take all of us," I said.

"Really? That big a fish to fry?"

"With the local administration asking for us specifically to take on this bodyguard gig, I doubt it'll be smooth enough for us to ride it out while twiddling our thumbs."

I still wasn't sure if this was *good* news, but Schnee's letter chiefly detailed a request from the government. This was the perfect example of why it paid off to maintain connections with the shot callers and prime movers. According to Lady Maxine, the request had been authored by a powerful mediator that worked exclusively with the government. The thing I was worrying about was that they were quite the straitlaced type. Instead of providing local backup to solve local problems, in the capital you would sometimes see mediators outsourcing jobs to people in the countryside. This was one such client, and it was one we hadn't actually worked with before. I was sure they wouldn't do anything too untoward and we would be paid on time, but all the same, I couldn't completely trust them.

I had to make sure we didn't have a "No hard feelings, but..." situation on our hands again. It was hard to recognize us little people from the lofty heights of state power—we tended to disappear into the big picture. I had played enough games where I was on the other side of the equation, and to be honest, an adventurer rarely amounted to more than a game piece, easily traded for larger gains. If it came to saving ten thousand or more common people at the cost of our clan, then we would be brushed away as easily as anything. As an ally to the people, it made judging jobs from the upper crust a lot more difficult. I wasn't about to just shaft the public for my own crew's sake, but I couldn't just throw self-preservation and duty to my subordinates to the wind either.

With my cup still in hand, I leaned back in my chair with a creak. Schnee gave an awkward smile as she scratched her chin.

"I'll fix you a decent deal, so chin up, okay?" she said.

"Thanks. I was always planning on asking," I replied. "This seems

fishier than the roadhouse job."

"Hey, that's still a little bit of a sore point for me, so I'd 'preciate if ya didn't bring it up..." Schnee said with a guilty expression before disappearing, apparently with no real interest in joining the party. I expected she was busy protecting Marsheim in her own way.

Before long we'd have to call it quits on revels for a while, roll up our sleeves, and put in the hours to set the city back on track again. The alternative was to see this whole thriving hotbed of adventure collapse in on itself for good. All our trusty new hires deserved better than to lose their hold on their dreams so early.

[Tips] There are many sorts of mediators that arrange jobs with the local administration. Those who work in Marsheim, from whom the Fellowship of the Blade receive jobs, are on the smaller end of the spectrum. Indeed, there are larger mediators who recruit from all over the Empire for jobs right from the capital's most vital political and business circles.

In the past, this was a job conducted by the Adventurer's Association, but now, with the Age of the Gods long passed, it has become a matter of public administration.

I'd gotten a bit too used to dressing comfortably; my formal wear usually felt tight and stuffy these days.

"I guess this'll do," I muttered as I gave myself a once-over from above with a handy bit of magic. I had always intended to pick up Unseen Hands for its variable use in battle by summoning a whole host of them, but it was really useful for lots of other stuff too.

We were paying a visit to some upright people, and not unlike your old-school call to arms, there was a certain amount of girding one's loins one had to do beforehand, even if in this case it meant gussying myself up. It was a pain, but unfortunately it wouldn't do to just hang around in armor with a sword hanging at my waist for all occasions. The Fellowship had earned some considerable renown; it wasn't fitting for its leader to not show up dressed to the nines. Even if the client we were visiting didn't give a damn about my

appearance, it was important to consider how the world at large would view you. I'd hate to invite any gossip to the effect of "Look, Goldilocks is visiting *them* in his commoner's clothes! They're below even the Fellowship!"

Unfortunately it seemed this attitude was the same wherever you went. It would be as rude as visiting the higher-ups at your company without a suit or tie and still in your indoor slippers. Even if they welcomed you with a smile, you would be assessed with the cold, heartless eye of a butcher appraising a cut of meat. On a personal level, it also saved time. Showing up in proper formal wear was an easy way of showing you respected them. You could say without a word that you were taking the meeting seriously and to intimidate the other party enough to not look down on you.

As such, I'd dusted off the same outfit that I'd worn to that meeting at the Golden Mane all those moons ago. I'd never thought I'd get so much mileage out of these clothes. I'd been foolish to think that I'd be free of the curse of playing dress-up after leaving the capital. It seemed like you couldn't so easily cut ties with the past.

My preparations were finished soon enough. My clothes were all fine, my hair was tied up nicely, and I even packed an incense bag I'd bought on a spur of the moment. My appearance was good. All that was left was to pull on my cloak, tuck my fey knife into my sleeve, and head out. Just as I left my room, someone appeared from the room opposite.

"Hey. What perfect timing," Mika said.

"You said it, old chum," I replied.

Seeing my friend dressed up far more classily than me made me feel incredibly awkward. In his full formal wear, Mika's beauty shone through more than it usually did. His hair was combed out, giving the impression of an angel's halo. It was so lush that I imagined not even the finest-toothed comb would tangle in it. I wondered if he'd put some blush on, for his cheeks radiated an allure that didn't just come from good health. The slight red makeup under his eyes heightened his enchanting boyish looks.

I was pretty much certain that this was the work of Lady Leizniz.

That perverse and deviant mind had done wonders for— *Ahem,* I mean, how could she dare to do this to him?!

Mika's clothes were a step above too. While his usual outfit was splendid enough, today he was wearing a two-buttoned black robe with a shirt (also two-buttoned) that had somewhat long sleeves—with some impressive frills—and a tall stand-up collar. The fact that his cloak had no sleeves of its own had a bewitching charm to it—as much cool as cute. As for his lower half, his trousers were tight, drawing the eye to all the highlights of his bone structure down there. Who knew what kind of life you had to live to draw out this level of beauty?

I felt positively *simple* in comparison. I had picked clothes that I could wear when demands for my appearance were placed on me, so it should be no surprise, but if you saw us together you'd see a professor and his manservant. In the long years since I'd stopped being a dress-up doll for the pervert supreme, my fashion sense had dulled, but I felt horribly embarrassed to be stood next to my chum like this. Usually I would convince myself with the logic that as long as I scrubbed up well that was fine, but I felt positively ashamed.

Mika's gentlemanly charm far outclassed mine right now. He glittered so much that it was dulling me by comparison. I felt so ragged next to Mika; I lacked any sophistication. Although both our outfits had been made by Lady Leizniz, the impression we gave was heavily influenced by the person inside, it seemed. That was something that didn't particularly matter when I was in my casual garb, like the day we reunited, but when we were both being as flash as we could manage, I felt woefully daunted.

"What might be the matter, Erich?" he asked.

"Nothing... I just felt that you've widened the gap between us in terms of style and elegance."

"I can lend you my spare outfit, if you like?"

"Me in a magus's outfit, after all this time? That would be even more shameful, chum."

Mika's suggestion had mostly been meant as banter, but my awkward response garnered a small chuckle from my friend. He covered his mouth with a sleeved hand.

"I think any and all outfits would suit you, pal."

"Enough of that... I'd look like a child playing dress-up."

Only nobles were truly cut out for a fancy outfit. The Empire was a big place, but it was rare to see someone look so good in garb as sophisticated as Mika's. *Ahh, old chum,* I thought, *how many people have you driven off the straight and narrow with that beauty of yours?* I felt an urge to ask Elisa the next chance I got, but it was probably better for my mental state to remain ignorant. Was I altering the very demographic makeup of Marsheim just taking him out on a walk with me like this? How many unexpected sexual awakenings would come about tonight because I'd insisted he come along?

Sorely worried for the morning, I made my way to the first floor and heard a cute squeak. Ah, maybe it would be rude to describe it as a squeak. It was the crying of a child that so happened to sound like the high-pitched mewling of a kitten for its mother. With the sound, a figure appeared at the end of the corridor with a frighteningly untraceable presence.

"Hm? Oh, good morning, you two," said the young master of the Snoozing Kitten. Saint Fidelio had appeared, wearing a charmingly embroidered apron—which suited him oddly well—and a genteel air.

"You're both dressed up despite the early hour," he went on. "Not something to worry about, I hope?"

Mister Fidelio was still a healthy adventurer whose magnificent presence remained as impressive as ever. He had taught me the basics, and as I rose in rank, he'd continued to give me lessons on how to interact with my seniors. The main sign that any time had passed for him at all since we'd first met was the cute, fuzzy bundle in his arms. In her father's arms was a bubastisian baby with beautiful black fur, a pink nose that I worked hard to suppress the urge to touch, and two isosceles-shaped ears. The first child of the Saint and the missus.

"Good morning," I said. "Nothing major, just heading out on some errands."

"Yes, I've finally officially been made an adventurer, so we're doing the rounds to say hello," Mika added.

“Saying hello?” Mister Fidelio said. “Well, as long as you two are happy with what you’re wearing...”

Ignoring my own disgraceful appearance, I felt that Mika looked perfect, so I wondered what had caught Mister Fidelio’s attention.

Mister Fidelio’s daughter mewled again as her bright future continued to be written upon her new character sheet. Born at the same time as the Harvest Goddess had awoken, they had named her “Safiya,” meaning “purity” in the language of the central lands continent. The Saint’s arms were full—literally and figuratively—with caring for this new bundle of joy. Mister Fidelio’s long stints away on adventures meant that it had taken a while for them to be blessed with a child, and that anticipation had meant that she was cuter than anything. She was positively cherubic.

It had been quite the trial before the day she arrived, and everyone around her had showered her with their joy and celebration. After things wrapped up with the Kykeon affair, the flames of Mister Fidelio’s righteous anger had continued to burn, and it had taken a lot of work on Lady Maxine’s part to put them out.

We had been on our own mission, so I’d only found out later, but apparently the factory that Mister Fidelio had gone to had been reduced to ashes after “the sun itself manifested itself upon the earth”—or so the bedlam that had played out there had come to be described. His crusade against those foul drug peddlers had been kept on a steady simmer for ages since, and I remembered a Harvest Goddess priest coming to him with teary eyes, begging him to calm down. The thing was that although it was *diseased* wheat that was the key ingredient in Kykeon, it was still under the Harvest Goddess’s domain. There was no way it could survive his scorched-earth, “desert of glass” tactics.

To top it off, Shymar’s morning sickness had been particularly bad, throwing the inn’s day-to-day operations into disarray. Not only had Margit and I been called to stand at the front and run things, they had even resorted to asking Miss Zaynab for help. Talk about a terrifying time. Mister Rotaru was on-site to check up on each stage of the cooking process to make sure the food she made was *edible* for normal folk. I couldn’t laugh at it at the time, but it was funny

now to think about how we had banned her from supplying her own personally crafted "spices" in the kitchen. With the baby safely born, I could look back on those times with some humor, but it had really taught me that a new arrival was not easy in any sense.

Huh... When my brother was my age, he already had Herman...

The adventuring profession truly was a diversion. I wasn't married, didn't have a house, and I lived from day to day. I wouldn't have anything to say to anyone gossiping behind my back.

"Okay, we're heading out now," I said. "Miss Safiya, you do your best not to trouble your father now, hm?"

"I know crying is your full-time profession, but mind you don't overwork yourself," Mika added.

Because Miss Safiya was so small, she looked just like a cat. I tickled her nose and stroked her cheek to say goodbye, but she was so busy crying that she didn't even smile. I wondered what the little princess was bothered by.

"Heh, seems I can't get her to stop this crying. Not even her grandfather can stop it. Nothing is better than a mother in this situation, huh," Mister Fidelio said. He started to sing a hymn for his child instead of a lullaby to placate his little girl as he walked out of sight. I wondered if they were going for a little walk under the sun in the yard.

"Kids, huh..." I said.

"Oh? Finally realized the allure of fatherhood?"

"Quit that."

I jabbed Mika's side and laughed at his joke, in spite of how it wasn't funny in the slightest. Although my relationship with Margit was now more physical, I didn't have any immediate plans for children. For her part, Margit had explicitly said that she didn't want to become a mother yet either. Without even any experience from my past life to go on, I didn't have the confidence to be a father. The idea only filled me with dread.

My own father, Johannes, sometimes splashed out when he got overexcited and had the tendency to praise me overmuch, but he was a great father who had raised a wonderful family. He had managed to raise all of his children without even one of them

passing on—the Harvest Goddess's boon kept infant mortality relatively low, but many children still never made it to adulthood—and his first three sons had managed to get respectable jobs. All told, he had done a smashing job.

Then there was me. Sure, I was head of a clan, whatever that's worth, but I was still an adventurer without a proper job. I didn't have a fixed salary. I would leave the house for days at the time not knowing when I would be back next. Maybe I wouldn't even be coming back.

Fatherhood terrified me. I had no guarantee I would do a good job. That was why Margit made sure she didn't get pregnant. She was spoiling me yet again; I felt tears coming at how pathetic I was.

"I think you would make a good father and a fine husband," Mika said.

"Enough, old pal. How do you expect me to do something that exceeds even my wildest imaginations?"

With my cumulative lifespan, I was reaching the beginnings of old age, but I couldn't help but feel pitiful.

[Tips] It is an important part of etiquette to dress smartly in line with one's station when making visits. However, if one is overdressed it may provoke the other party.

All the same, if you don't dress well you may be branded as churlish, and bad rumors are sure to follow. It's a tricky balance that isn't so easily managed.

Our first stop was to drop in with Clan Laurentius. I imagined this meeting would go smoothest out of the ones we had planned for today, and I figured Mika would be best off if we eased into things.

"Oho, so you are the esteemed friend of this godly warrior here, hm?" Miss Laurentius said.

"That he is. My best friend whom I can leave my back to in any battle," I replied.

"Thank you for the meeting. My name is Mika. I hope you will remember me as but a humble mage who clears my friend's path in battle and mends the street in times of peace," Mika said.

I presented Mika with the highest praise in ogre terms, and Miss Laurentius appraised him herself from tip to toe. She gave a nod, seemingly satisfied.

"You are an honest boy, despite being a mage," she said.

"E-Excuse me, Boss Lady? Wasn't that last bit a little rude?!"

The one who'd just chimed in was a mage, rare for this clan of mostly fighter types, and one of the old guard alongside Kevin and Ebbo. From the fresh scar crossing his cheek, I assumed that he must be a battle mage as opposed to a backline support caster.

"You're an exception, don't worry. But there is one particular eccentric to look out for in this city, okay?" she said.

"I know that loose lips sink ships, but allow me to say that my chum here isn't so weak as to fall for such appeals," I said.

"I see, yes, of course," Miss Laurentius said. "Forgive me, Mika. We've just had our fair share of troubles with mage types, you see."

Ever since the whole Kykeon incident, the atmosphere in Marsheim had been positively prickly toward magicians. Of course, this was only among the chosen clans who had been involved in fighting to bring normalcy back to our city, but Clan Laurentius in particular were particularly on edge, as they despised cowardly schemes of the sort that Kykeon had been used for.

"But I must say, those are quite some injuries," I said.

"I suppose," Miss Laurentius replied. "Mostly from cleanup raids, but also because I've seen a sharp increase in visits from upstarts with no notion of their own limits. Wonderful, if you ask me."

It seemed that she was enjoying...sorry, *preoccupied with* the lingering chaos in Marsheim.

"We were ambushed out on the road," she went on. "They'd mustered quite the horde. Took longer than expected to hunt them all down."

"They attacked the caravan you were protecting? B-Brave bunch, the lot of them..." I took a physical step back in surprise, but the ogre waved both hands in front of her and laughed.

"I was a personal hire of the couple who ran the caravan, so I was inside, you see. They were pretty well-off, so I could sit inside without the thing creaking under my weight. It was a big caravan, so

they let me have a nap inside."

Aha, that made sense. There was no fool in all the western reaches who would dare pick a fight with a single ogre warrior, let alone her whole tribe. Their might was so renowned that if a legion of a hundred foot soldiers managed to fell a single warrior, the deed would be enshrined for many years to come—regardless of whether anyone would be left to enjoy it. With Miss Laurentius leading a bodyguard mission, even someone without two brain cells to rub together would rethink their plans.

Unfortunately for the bandits, most of Clan Laurentius had joined when she was still resting on her laurels, and so they didn't cut the scariest of figures. The assailants had most likely clocked them as regular old adventurers—a presumption that swiftly evaporated once Laurentius and her most battle-ready peers, forged in brutal training with her, had burst from the carriage.

"But, you know, one attack on the way out and three on the way back, once the carriage was loaded up with coin, makes me think this was planned," she went on.

"With *foreign* coin, you mean?"

"Yeah. Went out to the satellite states."

The fact that Clan Laurentius had been hired for the job meant that either the caravan or the merchant purchasing their goods was quite well-off. I agreed with her—the odds seemed slim that so many attacks would have come their way purely by chance. It wasn't unheard of for bandits to share information and team up to take down large caravans, but it was a bit too much to think that they'd figure out the route the caravan would be traveling without outside intel. This whole thing stank even more when I considered that these were just your regular bandit riffraff, as opposed to the Infernal Knight and his rogue chivalric order. Either the local lords weren't doing their job, or the Empire's own knights couldn't keep everyone in check—chances are it was one of the two. Just thinking of how many shady roadhouses Siegfried had to fight his way through made me more certain. It was simply too unlikely, even factoring in his peculiar relationship with coincidence.

"Hmm, yes, something stinks here," I said.

"Indeed. Your friend there chose the right moment to be an adventurer! No empty plates for our lot in times like these."

"Is that so?" Mika said with a weak smile. I wanted him to relax—this was the right response to be giving to her.

Man, this sucked. I'd become an adventurer so I could do stuff like slay dragons, plumb ancient ruins, and avert world-ending crises! I didn't want to be locked into solving nefarious plot after nefarious plot. That wasn't to say I didn't enjoy them in the past. City adventures and shadowruns were fine and all, but they were not what I wanted from my actual life. My goal was to become a no-frills, dime-a-dozen hero—why did I have to trudge through this mire of intrigue and mystery? Come on, could someone throw me a nice, simple adventure where I could slay the big bad and earn a refreshing victory?

"Well, it *was* only small fry that tried to take me down," Miss Laurentius said.

"Boss Lady, please don't call fifty bandits small fry. Some cantons woulda thrown us a festival for that kinda hero business," Kevin said as he brought some booze over, and I was in agreement. Even one of the old guard of Clan Laurentius had emerged with a bandage around his left arm. She truly must have gotten back on her A-game if she had emerged from an epic battle like that without a scratch.

I still offered to spar with her in exchange for a favor every now and then, but she had changed so much from when I'd first met her that I couldn't even begin to show off like I did back then. How close to all out would I have to go if she came at me fully armed and with everything she had? Maybe I would be dancing at the precipice of death itself.

"Whatever the case, stand by him and you'll find yourself wading through a sea of chaos. Give it your best, beauteous one," the ogre warrior said.

"I am well aware," Mika replied.

Hm? Did Miss Laurentius diss me just now?

I was shocked that she'd make light of my luck like that, but Mika's introduction was going so smoothly that I didn't have the time to air out my complaints.

Jeez, can't a guy catch a break?

Just recently while I was walking around town, I'd heard a certain poet's own "arrangement" of a song about me that went something like: "Goldilocks Erich prays over and over before traipsing up the slope, 'O God of Trials, grant me some misfortune upon the road ahead.'" I honestly considered totally flipping out. Sure, I was a bit outspoken about my aspirations, but who said I did that Japanese period drama crap?!

After leaving the Inky Squid with a few unsaid things still stuck in my throat, we headed to the Heilbronn Familie, to little enough fanfare that I'm not going to bother giving the blow-by-blow. When it came to all Marsheim's troubles, that clan was practically at the steering wheel, so I doubted they would be able to notice if things outside the city were any more chaotic than usual or not.

Ah, there was one thing that happened that warranted consideration. Brunilde's nephew was old enough to start chirping on about how he wanted to be an adventurer, so he asked if we could take him under our wing. I wasn't sure how I felt about my clan being treated like an adult day care for the other clans' brats, but Stefano'd been pretty deadpan about it; by all appearances he wasn't making a joke. He was a moderate at heart, and so the fact that he wanted his relative to be an upright adventurer indicated to me that this youth had a good nature. This seemed like the sort of story you'd see in a gangster flick where a yakuza passes a relative of theirs into someone else's custody before the game got ahold of them.

All this extra business circulating in my brain was bound to be trouble; at our next stop I'd need my head screwed all the way on, my guard all the way up, and my foot ready to be put down at the first provocation. You might have guessed it—we were bound for the Baldur Clan's hideout.

"Have you had some kind of revelation or something?" I asked.

"Not at all... This is just...for fashion..." Nanna replied.

We were in the clan's reception room—with tea set out as usual, despite the fact that I never partook. Nanna sat across from us, wearing a heavy veil. Between that and the new thing she was doing

with her hair, she was almost unrecognizable. While it suited her image, it wasn’t exactly a great fit for first impressions.



Interestingly, whereas her usual clothes were almost overencumbered with embroidery and jangling catalysts, her attire today was quite spartan. Why was she trying to look so unlike a magus? To top it off, her aura screamed *Go home!* Her reply to my letter about meeting Mika had been totally perfunctory, and now she was trying her best to not catch either of our eyes.

Hold on... Maybe she's found out that Mika's one of Lady Leizniz's favorites?

That would have explained it. Lady Leizniz loved to make her chosen favorites play together, so it was impossible to tell how wide the network formed by these former students went.

Fortunately for me, I was never fully woven into that web. I could chalk it up to having never been a proper College student, let alone an aspiring magus, but if I had been Lady Agrippina's apprentice instead of her errand boy, I most likely would've been drafted into the fold. Nanna still received news, despite her profession as a drug peddler at the ends of the earth, and so I wasn't sure if they were a tight-knit bunch or just committed on principle to sharing information.

At any rate, I was relieved. It looked like Mika wouldn't be recruited into anything, even though he was a magician. If Nanna pulled any wrong moves, Lady Leizniz would turn out her hiding places in an instant. I wondered how she would react to seeing her former apprentice fallen so low? Would she cry? Fly into a rage? Develop a whole new perverse fixation? While it would be interesting to watch from the peanut gallery, I would feel bad the whole time, so I decided not to inform Mika about her past.

On a personal level, blackmail material wasn't something you should boast about on any sort of regular basis—it was something you kept in your back pocket until the perfect moment. If I revealed my hand too early, then not only would its effects be lessened, I might end up on the receiving end of a desperate measure that could annihilate me and her in the process.

This little reunion of Former Victims of the Pervert Wraith didn't have much substance to it, and so it ended without anything of note happening. We were in and out in less than thirty minutes. The only

real news that I picked up was that the distribution of Kykeon had been completely purged from Marsheim, and now people were struggling to figure out how to handle the penniless addicts left craving a replacement.

Interestingly, Nanna's drugs were plenty habit-forming for purely psychological reasons, but nothing she made came with any significant physical ramifications. Unlike her own patented stock, Kykeon caused quite severe physical withdrawal symptoms. You'd feel fine while you were taking the stuff, but once it wore off, you would be forced to deal with incredible physical pain. Considering how cheap it had been sold for, prospects for addicts had not been good.

While Nanna's own selection was just as crooked, it sold for at least ten times more. It was impossible to replace Kykeon with something of good quality and relatively safe—strange words to use for illicit junk—and so the outcome of the poorer echelons of society that had been addicted was quite tragic. That was why stimulants were just bad news. The end didn't come once your supply was cut off—after the comedown, you'd do anything for another hit. And now Marsheim was teeming with folks with that monkey on their collective back.

The Heilbronn Familie were doing their best to keep the peace, and the Baldur Clan were almost veering toward ignoring these victims on account of their feeling that nothing more could be done. I didn't totally begrudge her for this—even on Earth, we'd never cracked any sort of reliable method for curing any kind of chemical dependency outright. You couldn't turn sauerkraut into cabbage, you couldn't unboil an egg, and we all had nothing to do but help folks manage with what had been made of their lives, in what little ways we could.

"They all really are a lively sort," Mika said.

"Lively?" I said, confused by my friend's opinion—not a feeling I was used to. I supposed that compared to the College, Marsheim *did* have fewer weirdos and nutjobs. The thing about the College was that your character wasn't at all factored in when it came to promotions, so you ended up with an odder bunch than even your

typical adventuring crew. Within its walls, even the law had a loose grip on anyone's behavior so long as no one who cared found out; things like ethics and social mores had a way of evaporating right out of your average student body member's skull. The fact that my former master Lady Agrippina could proudly say she was a College professor—even if she didn't *like* to—should tell you everything you needed to know.

Fortunately in this regard, my old chum still had ahold of his morals. If you thought about it, it was quite the feat for someone to get so close to a research position with their brain essentially pristine. Call it natural talent, call it his master's good character—whatever the case, I made a note to figure out which god to thank for how Mika's innate goodness was still alive.

"You made this place seem petrifying. I was a bit beside myself thinking about what a den of rogues this would be, but they're all pretty normal, no?" he replied.

"*Normal*. Define normal," I said.

"I've met people who tried to predict the course of my whole career (and subsequent demise) based on one glance at my face. I've been asked by *multiple parties* if I'd be willing to part with my skull, purely because they found its shape pleasing. The people I've met today are pedestrian by comparison."

I was filled with a renewed worry whether Elisa would be okay surrounded by all those madmen in the College far away in the capital... *Oh, and Mika? I'd like to know the names of everyone who made that second request. Just for future reference, and maybe so I can bring them up with Lady Agrippina if I really need to...*

"I'm actually more depressed thinking about tomorrow."

"Oh yeah, you're popping into the branch school to say hello."

Mika's affiliation remained with the main College back in Berylin, but while he was in Marsheim he would also fall under the branch school's affiliation during his practical work here. His actual jobs would come directly from the government, so his relationship with the school wouldn't be all *that* intimate. When I thought about how he was spending his precious time helping me as an adventurer—even putting aside the fact that he needed the extra work to pay his

daily expenses—it really made me happy.

As I was pondering this, Mika's expression turned gloomy as he explained how he wasn't heartened much by the fact that the school was run by someone of another cadre.

[Tips] The College of Magic puts emphasis on publications and technical skill when it comes to promotions; they care nothing for one's character. Functionally, there are no consequences for any breach of public morals within the social and bureaucratic milieu of the College, so long as it breaks no actual *laws*.

After visiting the various clans of Marsheim, we made our way back to the Snoozing Kitten.

Siegfried and Kaya were spending their time off back in their own home, and Margit was out on a nighttime training expedition (read: high-stakes game of hide-and-seek) in the woods with the aspiring scouts among the Fellows. I wondered if they were cutting the two of us a break so we'd finally have the evening alone together.

We'd had a light Imperial-style dinner and were indulging in an after-supper drink when Mika, with an awfully rueful expression, apologized for being so late. When I asked him what he meant, he pulled out a thick wad of envelopes from his inner pocket.

"I'm so sorry," he said. "I meant to give these to you this morning."

We had been busy with getting presentable in the morning, and then the afternoon passed by just like that with all the fun we had. Mika scratched the back of his head awkwardly; his cheeks were flushed red, and it wasn't because of the alcohol.

"Hey now, it's fine," I said. "It's not as if these are letters that need to be read as soon as possible, are they?"

"I know, but..." Mika ventured, but I honestly told him it was fine. I looked at the first envelope and saw that it was, to my immeasurable joy, from Elisa. We continued to exchange letters every now and then, but I was always happy to receive a letter from my little sister. I checked the next envelope and saw that it was also

from Elisa, as was the next... *Hmm...*

"Ah, well," Mika said, noticing my expression. "When I said I would be heading to you I told her she should write a letter, but it seems our little sister got a little carried away. Apparently they wouldn't all fit in a single envelope."

As my chum had said, all of the envelopes were full to bursting. Wax seals were affixed on each, designed to prevent anyone but me from opening them, and they were fighting valiantly to keep their envelopes closed. It looked like she had been holding back on her letters due to her limited allowance, but the chains had come loose the moment the opportunity for free delivery presented itself.

"I told her that she could just roll them up, seeing as I would be carrying them, but she wouldn't listen to me and said she wanted to use cuter envelopes."

"W-Wow, I see. Sorry...and thank you."

Elisa had no limits when she got into something; she would never make concessions for the weird things she believed in. Yep, we sure were related. I wanted to jump for joy at the thought, but it also made me a bit worried about her.

The next envelope had Lady Leizniz's name on it, penned in her elegant cursive. It was thick...and heavy. I thought I could tell what she had included in this large envelope. I placed it to the side.

The last one was from someone whose name I *really* didn't want to see. From someone who would be happy to trade blows if they were attacked politically. Yes, it was from my former employer, the noble daughter Agrippina du Stahl turned Count Agrippina von Ubiorum. I wanted to put it aside with Lady Leizniz's and pretend I hadn't seen it, but I knew I'd have to steel my stomach for it at some point.

"All right, I'll be heading to bed. It was quite the action-packed day, and tomorrow awaits," Mika said. I must have had the strangest expression on my face, but he gave me a smile before standing up with a small yawn. He wasn't heading to his room just because he was tired, but mostly because he wanted to give me the space to fully enjoy reading Elisa's letter.

On this spring night, with fewer customers at the Snoozing Kitten,

I would be left alone on my barstool. The missus had closed up shop earlier tonight, as she expected there wouldn't be anyone coming in—the room was accessible from outdoors too, so she often closed things up early—and so it looked like I'd have all the time and freedom to read as I pleased.

"Got it," I said. "Sorry for dragging you around all day. Goodnight, old chum. Sleep well."

"I should be the one apologizing," Mika replied. "Goodnight to you too, old pal."

Leaving behind a conjured light, my dear friend headed to his room. I lowered my head in gratitude, making sure that he could not see. He might have acted as if it didn't mean much to him, but this thoughtfulness really meant everything to me. It was the sort of thing you couldn't do unless you'd thought about the other person enough to really know what it was they wanted. It was a precious thing to have such a considerate friend. I was truly blessed by the connections I'd made in this life.

With this gratitude in mind, it was time to read my little sister's letter. Ah, but before that, I needed to get things ready. I pulled out a candle from my case and, after checking that no one was around, lit it with a quick ignition spell. I got rid of Mika's light, and under the flickering candlelight, I summoned a piece of ice into existence and poured out some whiskey. I'd already eaten dinner, so I had nothing to nibble on, but Elisa's letter made for the perfect side dish.

All right, everything was ready. I was sitting at the bar counter with dim lighting. Was there a better scene than this?

Now that I was satisfied, I slowly cracked open the wax seal with careful movements. The stack of paper inside was dyed a light pink, and she must have scented them with some fragrance; it was as if I'd wandered into a field of flowers as soon as I drew the letter out. It was a lovely and familiar scent. I remembered the flower field Elisa loved to take me to back home in Konigstuhl just as the spring days were getting warmer. The flower field was in the corner of the canton; we didn't know the names of what bloomed there, but they came in every year like clockwork. It was a favorite spot of hers. She'd been putting a lot of energy into picking apart the inner

workings of conjuring scent; it looked like she had recreated the smell of our childhood. My little sister really was a genius. I was sure the day of her professorship wouldn't be too far off. Then we could go to that flower field together again.

With these memories in my heart, I saw that every last inch of the paper had been used up, her tiny letters filling up every blank space. Her seasonal greeting was perfect, as if she had received a noble education, and her flowing cursive didn't have a trace of hesitation to it. Her feminine and lovely script must have taken a lot of practice; I could see her cute expressions in my mind's eye just from the letters alone. I tenderly read each paragraph, I adored each emotion-filled sentence, and I savored each innocent word.

The letter detailed her daily life but touched on all the wonderful little episodes that you'd want to share with family. Just reading it overjoyed me. I could tell that she was trying to convince me not to worry about her; it was working.

You made a friend, huh? Your big brother's happy for you, Elisa. But make sure to let me know the name of that boy who keeps messing with your hair. Oh no, I won't do anything mean, I just want to talk *with him...* I wondered who this stupid br—*lively young lad* was. Teasing girls was something you could only get away with until you were about ten. I'd call in a favor to Lady Agrippina once I knew his name.

What's this? Lady Agrippina promised to grant you a cat familiar when you're old enough because you said you thought cats were cute? Yes, cats were good. Because they were cute, sure, but also because they were a gold mine of technical advantages and perks and...*ahem*, although they couldn't travel as far distances as bird familiars, they were handy creatures in that they could easily sneak into buildings. They had good senses, which made them great for keeping intruders out. Above all, cats had an affinity for magic. They were wonderful neighbors that protected people from bad dreams and cleansed impurities. A cat suited Elisa's gentle demeanor far more than a crow would.

Elisa said that she was looking forward to receiving a white cat with blue eyes "just like my Dear Brother's," but how much was that

going to cost? You needed a cat that had a pedigree suitable for being made a familiar—and one that a cat lord deemed was raised well—and the costs were so high that at first glance you'd assume a few too many zeros had found their way into the figure on the bill.

It was really hard to gauge Lady Agrippina's depths. She wasn't the sort of soft teacher who would gift someone a cat familiar just because they said they liked the creature.

I couldn't really get a complete read on the situation, but it'd be fine as long as she was happy. *But, Elisa... Your big brother feels a bit weird about you calling that cat "Erik." You do realize that's just a regional spelling of* my *name, right...?* I didn't really mind that the name was inspired by my own, but it made me kind of jealous. Unlike me, little Erik would get to be by Elisa's side at all times to be loved and protect her in turn before long. I was more than content with my current situation, but these thoughts made me want to rush to Berylin. How lucky I was to be so torn.

I wondered if I could find a way to clone myself so there'd be one of me to be a proper big brother to Elisa and another who could enjoy his adventures to his heart's content. It was a crying shame that even with a bewildering stack of XP, there was no skill or trait that could make this a reality. Oh well—in all honesty, I'd played out this scenario in my head before, and I knew that one me would get jealous of the other; it'd all end in blood.

I cut my inane train of thought short and returned to the letter, where Elisa's report on her recent life continued, going into a level of detail you'd expect from her diary. She asked Lady Leizniz for clothes that she herself thought were cute. She had gotten used to Mika's changing sex and appearance by now. Her classes were still difficult, but she was proud that she could answer correctly in the given time.

Elisa's daily life detailed here was as precious as the stars in the night sky. She was truly enjoying her life as a student. Could anything in this world make me happier? It brought back memories of working under Lady Agrippina—which I'd sorely wished to kvetch about at the time—and battling enemies so tough I wanted to tell my life's GM and extended dev team to meet me in the goddamn parking lot. These memories almost seemed sweet now. Of course,

if someone asked me to do it all again, I would have to refuse, but those days felt worth it now. The only moments that tugged at my heart were where she said that she wished I'd been there to see something with her or to have eaten some delicious thing with her.

It wasn't my place to say, as someone who'd gone out to become an adventurer on their own selfish whims, but I really wished I could be by my sister's side. But the reality was that I'd chosen the adventuring life. I'd gotten stronger to achieve this dream, and I continued to honor the oath I'd made. That was what let me keep introducing myself as Erich of Konigstuhl with my pride intact. I sometimes considered other possibilities, but I wouldn't allow myself to falter. This was for Elisa's sake too, and she seemed content enough to watch me as I set out on this path.

I needed to pen a reply that was longer than usual to match her level of commitment. I had sent a letter a little while ago, but there were so many small things that brought me joy, just like she had written, so I doubted I would lack for content.

Oh, there's a postscript. "PS: Lady Leizniz said she would send you a letter, so I asked her to send a recent portrait. It's a little embarrassing, but I've grown since you saw me last, so it would be nice if you could have a look."

As soon as I finished reading that sentence I moved at what I can safely describe as the highest land speed I'd achieved in years to grab at Lady Leizniz's letter. I cracked open the wax seal and unveiled what was within. The letter was in the way, so I put it aside; what I saw was the image of the most beautiful young woman in the world. The portrait was postcard-sized and painted in delicate oils. Elisa stood in the same posture as the painting I'd taken back to my family all those years ago to show them how she'd grown. By now she had grown into a breathtakingly lovely young lady.

Elisa was sitting elegantly in a chair, as wonderful as a single lily made flesh. She was taller, and her once short, childish arms and legs had grown, giving her figure a more mature balance. Her beautiful hair now reached to her waist with a wonderful luster and was decorated with black ribbons festooned with gems. I was certain

even the gods would be jealous of such a sight. Her once chubby, youthful face was now more mature, and her slight smile spoke to her good upbringing. Her smile continued to give me a warm feeling in my chest, but it was clear that the girl I knew was transforming into a woman.

"Ohh..."

I found my voice slipping from my lips. I poured out another glass of whiskey from the hip flask my brother had given me and drank it. It passed down my throat with a mellowness that seemed like the Wine God had blessed it Himself. Alcohol always tasted many times better with snacks, but *this* was an ambrosia of the likes the gods hardly ever drank.

It was true that one's own little sister was always the most darling in the entire world.

I felt wonderful, so I took the letter and the portrait in my arms and headed to the yard. It had been such a great day that I was sure the moon would look beautiful, and indeed it was. The full moon was coming into focus as the night set in, casting a gentle light. With not a cloud in the sky, the stars followed in the moon's wake as they danced across the black velvet. It had really been a great day.

"Someone's in a good mood."

I heard a voice behind me, and I could sense a familiar elusive presence. I slowly turned around and saw a svartalf, her youthful form indicating that the False Moon had begun to wane.

"Of course," I said. "I received a letter from Elisa."

"Oh you did? I wondered what had gotten you so cheery," Ursula said with a laugh that sounded like a dinging bell. While Elisa had grown, this pure alf was the same. Exactly the same.

As I had gotten older, the other alfar had stopped engaging with me with quite as much interest as they had once done. They still sometimes reacted to my blue eyes and shining hair if I called for them, but their interest in me had really dwindled since I reached adulthood. Alfar much preferred unblemished children.

However, Ursula and Lottie had remained as responsive as ever. If I called for their aid, then they would come as long as the False

Moon wasn't completely hidden. When I was alone, they would come out for a chat. Thinking about it now, they were terrifying, yes, but they were rare and valuable friends.

"Seeing as you're so happy, Beloved One, why don't you share some of that joy?" she said, just as I was showing off the portrait of Elisa, the cutest little sister in the whole wide world.

"Share some of that joy?" I asked. She gave a bewitching smile and held out her hand. Under the moonlight, her dark skin gleamed as she invited me over.

Aha, I see now. Every now and then can't hurt.

I was happy, and the moon was truly a joy to look at, but it would be a waste to simply observe it.

"Then shall we have a dance?" I said.

"Gladly. You're free to dance for all of eternity if you wish," Ursula replied.

"I'm afraid I'll have to politely decline."

With all the care in the world, I placed the portrait in an inner pocket, then took Ursula's hand. There was no music, but the gentle moonlight was more than enough. Hand in hand, we stepped in our dance as we enjoyed the quiet night.

The dance, content not to snatch me away this time, left me in the embrace of a pleasant weariness as I returned to my room. I hung up the portrait so I could see it from my desk and fell into a pleasant sleep.

The next morning, the missus waved Lady Agrippina's closed letter and Lady Leizniz's opened letter, asking, "These were left out. Do you not need them?" I went into full panic mode. It had been a good lesson that enjoying oneself was all well and good, as long as you didn't go overboard...

[Tips] Alfar love pure boys and girls.

A million trite, rote lines about "wicked sorcerers' lairs" rattled around in Mika's head.

Having made the rounds yesterday with his friend, Mika was paying his requisite visit to the college here in Marsheim as

scheduled. It was a two-story building on a quiet street a stone's throw from the slums along the city's west side. The building was quite wide—a simple affair, but not without its own restrained majesty. However, with its run-down walls and the eternal shade no matter the hour cast by its looming steeple, the building's grandeur was surpassed by its uncanniness. The formulae woven into the building's bones did their fair share deterring thieves and other interlopers, but only as a side effect of the general uncanny atmosphere radiating from the place and generally making it an undesirable spot to linger around regardless of one's intentions.

In Mika's eyes, this building seemed less of a place of learning and more of a laboratory for research. Knowing that Setting Sun scholars—already abnormal even among the den of extremists that was the College—made their home here made the whole scene all the more unsettling.

"Welcome, young student. Come in."

The one who had come to greet Mika was a young professor who looked to be a mensch. No, that wasn't quite right—Mika could sense from the man's mana waves that his appearance was the result of trying to *fend off* old age. The man had ginger hair resembling an underwhelming crop of carrots, and thin, green eyes. His features weren't that sharp, which lent him a distinctly non-Imperial look, but his smile—difficult for Mika to tell if it was genuine or not—was unpleasantly distinctive. The black robe that covered his tall and slender frame was standard for a magus, but he was wearing an unfamiliar white coat on top of it whose purpose Mika didn't grasp. Ruddy black grime covered the sleeves and collar; strangely colored stains from who knew what concoction gave it a distinctly unpleasant air.

"I am Professor Frauenlob of the Bechtolsheim cadre in the School of Setting Sun," the man said. "Unremarkable though my talent may be, I am the one in charge at this college. I must announce that while under this roof, I will not speak of any ill feelings toward any cadre. I hope that you too will keep in mind that pointless squabbling in a place of research and experimentation will result in a sad and pitiful death."

"It is an honor to make your acquaintance, von Frauenlob," Mika replied. "I vow to keep your words carved into my heart."

Mika hid any surprise in an easy smile as he gave a formal, noble introduction to this man who only gave his family name. The young mage hadn't even imagined that the person running the branch school would come out to meet him personally.

The School of Setting Sun had pioneered the entire field of psychosorcery, one of the most foul and taboo of magics, as well as the recreation of flesh and other regenerative techniques. Their school believed that there was glory to be found in peering into the abyss and were often at odds with the School of First Light—a center-leaning bunch, mostly defined by their distaste for extreme measures of all stripes.

Mika could sense an incredibly deep well of mana within this Setting Sun scholar; he knew how a relatively young man's frail body could sustain such a thing, and he didn't like it. The scholars who worked under the banner of the Setting Sun had the eventual goal of honing their magical studies to the point that they could *evolve* into superior organisms. They used all sorts of terrifying formulae to tinker with their very flesh; Frauenlob's artificial youth was hardly an uncommon trick of theirs. They were madmen who dipped toes into the realm of taboo just for kicks and ventured there in earnest without batting an eye. Their screws were *far* looser than even their fellow magia, some to such a degree that most would wonder if they'd ever had any screws to speak of in the first place.

"Now then, I'll show you around the place. Not that it's all that interesting, as I imagine you can already see. Ah, before that, allow me to give you this—to congratulate you on your appointment here. Put it on."

Without showing any trace of the wickedness his school was known for, Frauenlob handed Mika a bag. Inside was the same white coat that he was wearing. The sleeves were large as was the coat itself—large enough to be worn on top of any robe—and Mika put it on without a word. It was quite a splendid piece, with simple formulae making it water repellent and able to cast Clean at set intervals automatically; however, Mika wasn't so sure about the fact

that the cloak would take and use the wearer's mana. Still, given that your average Setting Sun member would argue without a hint of irony or trepidation that they ought to be provided a steady flow of convicts to keep their arcane furnaces fed, Mika felt he could let a relatively minor overreach like this slide. He asked about the coat's workings, partly out of curiosity and partly out of a desperate urge to make small talk.

"Our branch's research focus is pharmaceutical development and anatomy. Chemicals splash. Bodies leak. Sometimes some of our concoctions have quite potent smells. I practically live in my supply cabinets, so I don't really mind, but some more...sensitive folk from other schools might find it difficult to adjust to, you see."

"I see..."

"We've had quite a few magia who hated the idea of traveling here in untidy clothes that they wouldn't mind getting dirty, so I decided we should provide our people with something instead. They're cheap, so once Clean has stopped working on yours, feel free to toss it and request a new one. You can't have enough, so I used some of my budget from the College to prepare them in bulk. Please don't hold yourself back."

Potions and other magical concoctions contained mana and were developed so that they would cause phenomena that bonded well with reality. They were therefore difficult to remove from clothes with a simple Clean spell. Frauenlob had chosen to solve the matter through rugged and disposable safety wear.

Mika was shown around the building as he listened to Frauenlob's explanation and noted that the interior, in contrast to the eerie facade, was quite clean. The floor was made of a water-repellent material—not metal or wood—and the air was purified once every few hours. The equipment and materials were carefully stowed away in labeled cabinets and drawers. There wasn't a single mouse or even a speck of dust. Mika was somewhat taken aback by the fact that the cages for the test animals didn't even smell. He soon decided it wasn't worth thinking about too much—there was no way he could ever begin to comprehend what a Setting Sun scholar was thinking.

The many labs, few lecture rooms, meeting rooms, and offices were contained in the central building and west wing. The east wing was set aside as the treatment area for patients, with an isolation ward for "criminal patients"—which Frauenlob pointedly did not lead Mika through—as well as various storage rooms. There was also a small garden at the back of the premises, where there was an outbuilding containing various break rooms for the faculty.

"This will be your office," Frauenlob said. "Use it as you see fit. We have request forms if you need anything. As for basic supplies like paper, you can take those from the storage rooms in the east wing."

"Thank you very much. It's a...wonderful room."

After a tour of the branch school, Mika was given his own personal room in the central building, just like the other researchers, for his studies and work. While it was well cleaned, so he didn't have to worry about mold or dust, this room (even long disused as it seemed) was far too grand for a mere College student. There were two cheap but huge and sturdy cabinets, a desk, a desk chair, and a two-person sofa for visitors, on the off chance any came by.

Frauenlob sat down on the sofa, pulled out a small tin container, and made a small comment about the faculty's paltry head count.

"You don't mind if I indulge, do you?" he went on. "I should tell you that our facility is strictly no smoking, aside from the offices and the various rec rooms. Who knows what might happen to the chemicals if smoke were to interfere with them."

"I understand," Mika said. Frauenlob indicated that he was very much welcome to a smoke too, so he pulled out a cigarette with a brief thank you. As for Frauenlob himself, he pulled out some powdered herbs from his container and stuffed them into his nose. It was an herbal concoction that didn't need to be smoked, with the substances instead being absorbed through the mucus membranes. This unorthodox method was loved by magia who wished to enjoy their herbs without dirtying anything with the smoke.

"I've made sure to prepare your documentation on top of your desk, so I would appreciate it if you could give them a once-over before the end of the day. A weekly report is part of your

appointment here, so I've added in some old examples that you can use for reference."

After rubbing his nose and allowing the herbal mixture to settle, the thin professor turned his gaze to the floor and asked Mika if he had any questions.

"Yes, well, um... This college is quite the impressive place, but I was thinking it didn't have quite as many people as one might expect."

Frauenlob seemed quite bored as he answered, realizing that there was no point in hiding this. "At the moment, we have seven others stationed here. They work on a three-part cycle to tend to the treatment wing. Apologies, but we're all quite busy, including the ones who aren't present, so we cannot hold a welcome party for you."

This talk of a welcome party was probably Frauenlob's idea of a joke.

At any rate, Mika was shocked to hear that there were only seven others here. It might have been a branch school, but most of these institutions had a body of faculty at least in the double digits. Of course, there were only a handful of professors, but a branch school was still obliged to keep a stable of researchers and apprentices doing work that could only be done *outside* of the capital. It was even stranger considering the fact that this was the point of entry for mages in Marsheim, the regional capital. While it was true that few people had the natural aptitude for becoming a magus, this was simply too few.

When Mika asked about the faculty who weren't always present, Frauenlob rolled his head and left it tilting back. He stared behind him and bit his lip. If Mika's sense of direction was correct, the professor's nose was pointing toward the west.

This touched on the heart of the matter that was thrumming away beneath the notice of the common person. Mika realized that the puzzle pieces he had been given over the past few weeks were finally coming together. The noble's secret bodyguard mission that his old pal had been caught up in. The Adventurer's Association and the illegitimate child of a Baden that sat at its top. The magia that

chose to be absent from their haunt as if they were materials that had suddenly been requisitioned. The tea parties he had attended in the capital in place of his master or the meetings and dinners he had been present for as an attendant. Everything they had continued to discuss seemed to naturally fall into place.

Mika had managed to work out from the atmosphere that a plot masterminded by the government itself was at work here. While the Empire would often show a magnanimous smile, it was evident that they would resort to any crooked measure to advance their ends.

The schemes organized by the satellite states could scarcely be called *honorable*. But when it came to domestic affairs, the Empire could be terrifyingly unmerciful, with a dagger clenched in the hand behind its back. If it meant growing ever larger, then they would cut off any unnecessary parts with the ease of clipping an overgrown nail.

Mika had learned about this drastic attitude through his studies and through hearsay. Indeed, the country was made up of people who wouldn't hesitate to assassinate their own crown prince if he was deemed a blight; was it really any surprise that the apparatus of their collective will might get up to something fiendish?

This political plot was an all-or-nothing scheme demanding every last qualified player they could scrape together—even if it meant that the baseline urban upkeep of the Empire's cities would fall to the wayside, with *College students* filling the gap.

The callous yet beautiful face of the current Emperor appeared in Mika's mind's eye. Suspecting that great torrential rains of blood in the days to come would constitute the world getting off *lightly*, Mika dragged through an entire cigarette without losing a fleck of ash. And he thought—what could such a tiny cog such as himself do when the gigantic machine he was caught inside (no, *performing his function within*) began to do its diabolical work?

Could he shift himself, as this tiny cog, enough to save his dear friend if the need arose? In the cold and calculated schemes of the Empire, it was vanishingly unlikely one mere adventurer would be given a role of any importance. No, little cogs like them would be discarded if they threatened to bloat the budget. That was how little

the Empire put its trust in adventurers. However, this was within the center of the government—who knew what those granted jobs at the fringes were thinking.

"You'll also have to sign a contract for your appointment here," Frauenlob said.

It was important for people within the College to sign oaths to make sure they didn't blab about whatever they were working on. While some mild bellyaching could be ignored, it was forbidden for anyone to speak of concrete things like "whats" and "wheres." It was equally looked down upon to refuse to sign.

The young aspiring oikodomurge pricked his finger with his dagger, ready to sign with his blood, and smiled—hiding his inner thoughts that he would lay down his very life if the need arose.

"Your specialty is oikodomurgy, so your master requested this fieldwork of you, yes?"

"Ah, yes. I was told that I wouldn't lack for things to fix up here in Marsheim."

"Then I'll give you a season off work so that you can go about and appraise things with your own eyes. Don't worry, I'll fill out the requests for your stipend."

With Frauenlob's last words, Mika felt that every indulgence Frauenlob had afforded him had been out of *coldness,* not any sort of compassion. It seemed as if he had gone to great lengths to encourage Mika not to overstay his welcome. However, to Mika, this was perfect. He gave his thanks and said that he would go about his inspections with his friend. Erich had told him that he had just received a big job, and this posed the ideal opportunity to join him.

Mika felt a chill despite the white coat on top of his other clothes. Mika had as little interest in his sticking around in the same sterile air of the branch school as Frauenlob.

[Tips] Consignment to medical research is a particularly grievous corporal punishment. Criminal patients are purposefully infected with certain diseases and used as guinea pigs in the pursuit of new cures. Although they can atone for their crimes through being treated for one disease

and are acquitted upon recovery, many patients call it a gamble with long odds.

"The grim reaper won't come when you're ready for him."

Who was it that said that? That textbook next-victim-in-a-slasher-flick line? I remember when I first heard it that I thought it was cool on its face, but it felt weird coming from the person it had—whoever that had been. Memories of my time as Fukemachi Saku were hazy in many places. Strangely enough, what had bonded most indelibly to my soul were memories and anecdotes about TRPGs. Which made up more of me now: Erich of Konigstuhl or Fukemachi Saku?

"You look exhausted," Margit said.

"I am," I replied. "It's been a while since I've been so thoroughly thrashed and shown up."

This most recent little identity crisis was only the natural fallout. It had been a while since someone had reminded me that I was still just some no-name kid.

"Yes, government officials from Berylin are quite the strong characters, it seems," Margit murmured, seeming to say "How troubling."

As she had just said, the mediator had gotten in touch with us for our upcoming job, and when we'd gone to visit, we were met with a noble who claimed to be our client. This baron was from a house I'd never heard of, indicating to me either that they were some kind of branch family or just weren't all that special. Enough to assume that the family didn't have the people power to send someone to the capital. The fact that he hadn't heard of me—despite the fact that during my time in the capital, I had stood in the spotlight a little, or at least had served someone who was definitely in the spotlight—indicated that if he did often spend time in Berylin's social circles, then he had the distinctly ignoble quality of being bad at remembering faces and names.

To top it off, he'd treated me with all the loving care you would afford a no one adventurer in the sticks. You'll pardon me if I piss and moan a bit.

That damn baron's request was the most persnickety,

micromanaging demand anyone had ever made of me. I kind of wanted to say "Would you not be better off hiring a knight and his soldiers to do this instead of getting a mediator to hire a mere adventurer?" before storming off. But I was a patient boy. Lady Maxine had made explicitly sure to ask me *not* to turn down this request in her letter. I made sure that I was the picture of politeness during that meeting.

I secretly thanked Oozing Gravitas and Absolute Charisma here, because I felt that without them I would have been stepped all over.

I did have some sense of self-awareness. This was a huge job, and the baron was under considerable pressure to get it done, to the point he had no wherewithal left to handle any of it himself. I could tell he was putting all his effort into keeping his composure, but he was plainly annoyed to have to resort to asking the new clan on the block to do the job. I could tell that if I hadn't turned on the menace just a little he would've underestimated me in just the way Etan or Yorgos had at first glance. When we made our first introductions, I could tell when he first laid eyes on me that he thought I was a scrawny brat.

I had been the bigger man, offered to take on the job, then spent the rest of the four-hour meeting listening to reams of tiny details. It was exhausting, but it had been worth it.

"So what's the job?" Schnee asked.

"As the Manager has informed us already, we are to act as bodyguards for the delivery of some goods. The stock is incredibly valuable, so they needed someone they could trust."

Despite all the fine details, it was a simple gig at the end of the day: mind the goods, get them where they were going in one piece. According to the client, we'd be helping to move magical tools for some big social bash. This was nigh-priceless, sensitive equipment; they didn't want anyone they didn't trust even *approaching* the stuff. They'd been on too tight a schedule to vet their own reliable security, and so we'd been tagged in to help.

I had received an itemized list of the stock, and there didn't seem to be anything dangerous to transport. It was the typical fare you would expect to be given to young nobles at some kind of big

blowout celebration: silverware enchanted so that it wouldn't fog up, magically powered lighting, rings for a noble child stepping into their first social events that were enchanted to detect poisons, handkerchiefs enchanted to cast Clean on themselves, and so on and so forth.

According to the baron, these were gifts from the Emperor himself to celebrate the new nobles in the western reach who would one day support the Empire. Apparently it was a huge honor to be part of the job to help deliver these items, supplied by the College itself, to their intended owners.

Reading the inventory didn't raise any red flags, and with the College involved, it'd be difficult if not impossible for anyone to fabricate official documentation like this. It seemed almost ridiculous to not take it at face value. And yet, for those who knew the political situation here out west, you would wonder if now was really the proper time to be doing this. It made me suspicious. How many houses would actually be reassured by this level of praise? While a child might get excited about a gift from the Emperor, there would be five to ten times as many adults grumbling that they would prefer money or manpower. It was a strange use of budget. I thought the signatory stamps that kids got at their elementary school graduation seemed a far better waste of money.

And so, knowing this, I'd prepared my own countermeasure.

"I'm counting on you, Schnee," I said.

"Whew, this's got my own fur standin' on end, ya know?"

It was the perfect time for our informant to dig in and find out which parts of the dossier we could trust and which were bunk.

To be honest, we'd accepted a few lies as part and parcel, but we always took all bodyguard jobs seriously; this was just us doing our due diligence. We just needed to know what it was we needed to look out for and how best to react to it.

"This whole thing's been a bit fishy even from the first invitation from our mediator, isn't it?" I said.

"Yer not wrong there..." Schnee replied. "Though if I didn't know better, I'd be inclined to take the deal as it stands."

As she rolled up the piece of paper in her padded fingers, her

narrow-eyed expression wasn't happy.

"I don't doubt that the noble is who he says he is," I said. "But he's not all that high up the ladder and not close to the center either. Though the messenger pigeon was small, the documents are all up to snuff, so we can leave off considering whether the person actually sending off the job is lying or not."

"Y'got a real sharp tongue when he's not here, Erich," she said.

"There are simply times when you need to decorate your words with gold leaf and times when they need to spark like flint."

I drew up a quick likeness. I was certain that Schnee would be able to turn up some dirt we could use. There were two things I wanted to know: Why use us specifically, and what's got the bigwigs all the way out in the heartland making big, weird moves here in Marsheim?

"Hmm... At this stage, my li'l sniffer tells me that this is the sorta difficult job where ya get lies and truths in equal measure..."

I was just so certain that the goods we were tasked with weren't what it said on the tin. That sort of payload would've just been dispatched with some mid-range knight's retinue from somewhere nearer to the central Empire; the Fellowship would never have been tagged in in the first place. They were paying three drachmae up front and twenty librae a day in a lump sum on return—a frankly gobsmacking amount of cash, more than enough to attract a party of Beryliner adventurers who were already nice and cozy with the blue bloods. What stank worse still was how the goods were being dispatched *from Marsheim*. If they were so valuable, why not stick with the security detail they'd hired to keep the damn things safe all the way here? Even if checking the goods took a while, it seemed far cheaper to keep the former couriers on board and then send them out once more after a break.

The administration here played fast and loose with a great deal more than your average police department back on Earth; I was disinclined to trust them. They'd left so many holes in their cover story that I suspected they'd never intended to actually fool anyone close enough to examine the situation in any detail; if anything, I suspected they *wanted* us to put together what we were really

moving for them at some point.

"What to do..." Schnee went on. "I s'pose I could start by findin' who else is on this job and seein' who's hirin' them, as well as where those goods were sourced from... Nrgh, this's gonna take some time."

"You've got a real lead to chase; that's a hell of a lot easier than things were for you last time. If you could just work out what our cargo's *actually* for, that'd be a huge help."

I needed to set expectations here; otherwise she might end up putting some feelers out to the capital.

"Y'sure? Ya like settlin' scores, I thought."

"I only do it when the need arises—I don't *like* doing it." It kind of hurt to see her react with such a surprised expression, but I wasn't that vengeful a person. "Plus, depending on who I'm making a house call to, I might actually end up worse off. Sometimes it's better if you simply muscle your way through something and appreciate the lovely silence when it's over."

"It makes sense, but think about how I'll feel if I hand over what I've got and y'all don't make it back."

I was sure that it wouldn't feel good, but accepting that was partly why the Fellowship was able to occupy the position we did. It was kind of a necessity at this point, if an unpleasant one. To be honest, with the manager asking me to take this job on, it was almost as clear as day that some sort of political power play was going on under the surface.

She knew how bad it would be if she used me as a disposable piece, so it was highly unlikely the Marsheim Association was to blame here. I still hadn't forgotten that Lady Maxine herself had said that we were keeping the unruly clans in check. From where she was standing, we were an asset she wouldn't want to lose. However, that was only thinking of her position in a vacuum. What about the people who ranked above her? I doubted that Margrave Marsheim—rumored to be the younger brother of Lady Maxine by a different mother—would ignore his sister's request, but if this plot originated *even higher* than that, then my frame of reference needed to change.

Once we started going that far up the chain, we were talking about the sort of people for whom Ende Erde and everyone in it were such a small part of the picture that it wouldn't have surprised me if they chose to kick off open war with the local lords, just to tie things up here with one tremendous act of mass bloodletting and keep things from dragging on longer than they had the patience to put up with. On the scales, a century of Imperial dominance weighed far heavier than the personal circumstances of an Association manager out in the sticks. If the annihilation of the Fellowship could be traded in for one hundred years of peace, then would they crush us under their boot? Yes. Obviously. They would sign off on the papers without joy nor sorrow, merely a cold efficacy.

If we chose to run, our reputation would suffer; if we chose to take this on, we might meet our demise. Talk about a rock and a hard place.

"Well, it's not as if we're suffering from an impending checkmate. Let's take this easy, okay?" I said.

"Don't be a rerun of the ol' One Cup Clan now..."

Oof, that hurt.

Schnee wasn't completely wrong—it did feel like we were the canary heading into the coal mine right now. But our foe was probably going to be some local strongarm, some minor menace we could manage with sheer brute force. I still had a lot of gas in the tank until the moment I needed to go crying up to Lady Agrippina for help. It wouldn't do to go on the offensive without a fire being lit under us first.

[Tips] A noble's status is heavily dependent on the scope of their intelligence network.

"A bit of tough work is worth it for your home," Schnee muttered as she emerged from an alleyway in the cool morning air.

Many who knew her would be hard-pressed to recognize her. For her work today, she'd styled herself as a calico. Most mensch identified her by her snowy white coat—a few cheap dyes from her local market more than sufficed to anonymize her. Once she'd added

the finishing touches of some microadjustments to her resting expression—wider eyes, more pursed lips—even her fellow bubastisians wouldn't recognize her.

Mensch, the most populous people in this part of the world, and other humanfolk relied far too much on what they could *see*. Your average bubastisian, with their less comprehensive color vision, would struggle to grasp this weakness, but Schnee was a professional information gatherer. She would use anything she could to close the gap with her quarry. The effort of washing out this dye paled in comparison to the stink that might come from wading through the sewer.

To finish off the disguise, she had bought an incense pack containing the sweat scent of another bubastisian—bought through a special client—and had headed to the baths to completely mask her own musk.

And so, this first-class information broker resorted to her tried-and-true method...

"Good day! My name is Eferdia from Hollow Willow Trading!"

...she came in right through the front door.

With a smile, she stopped at the grand gate of the merchant's estate and handed her papers to the serious-looking officer on guard. In moments, the heavy gate opened before her.

"Ah. You're here."

"Yes, indeed! The polish you ordered has arrived."

Schnee assumed an affected, cheery Rhinian accent as she handed over some paperwork. In her hand was a fabricated letter addressed to the Marsheim branch of Calfedea Trading. Now, that wasn't to say that the letter was fake. It wasn't. What Schnee had done was find a genuine delivery from Hollow Willow Trading—with whom Calfedea dealt with—that didn't currently have a courier on duty and then take their place. There wouldn't be anything out of place on any logbooks.

Indeed, the paper, the stamp, and even the name of the signee on the documentation were all details belonging to a Hollow Willow employee. Everything had been arranged seamlessly; Schnee had merely made use of a clerical gap. The only small change Schnee

had done was to change the date of this delivery—originally due in two or three days—to a date where she knew, from checking their rota, that Calfedea's guards would be thin on the ground. No one would be any the wiser.

Everything was aboveboard—all that was different was that these documents were being delivered earlier and by someone different. While an eagle-eyed onlooker might have raised an eyebrow, the documents were all in order. Thus Schnee had managed to get through.

This too had been part of the informant's calculations. The guard on duty at this time was a freelancer with no connections with most of the traders Calfedea dealt with.

"Hello! Silverware polish delivery, made with love by Hollow Willow!"

"Thanks for bringing that over."

Next up was the checkpoint clerk, but this was easily dealt with too. Schnee was a professional. Calfedea Trading dealt in Marsheim's finest silverware and goods made from other precious metals. Polish was something they needed in abundance, so such traders came through so often they were all but invisible. Calfedea also sold polish in their stores, meaning that they couldn't have enough of the stuff.

"Oh yeah, I've been asked to tell you," the clerk said. "Stay away from the second warehouse. There's some magical tools stored up in there. Spells have been put up to keep them safe. Wouldn't want to have to deal with the headache of the alarms going off because you didn't know."

"You got it. I'll take mighty great care."

Making a mental note of this, Schnee continued her delivery. She could spend a little while—not so long as to invite suspicion—snooping around the warehouses and checking if the goods were actually there while overhearing what the people there had to say.

Hmm, looks like the supplies are all here, Schnee thought. There were fresh wheel tracks in front of the second warehouse, indicating some heavy goods had been safely delivered there. There were empty boxes, waiting to be reused. Schnee's magic-detecting ring was vibrating next to her chest—it looked like the warding spells

were the real deal.

What's with those carriages? Schnee thought. She had just been on her way out, trying not to overstay her welcome, when she saw a few carriages in the yard. The carriages themselves were of typical Imperial make, but there was something odd about them. Every inch of them had been armored and reinforced, leaving them oddly *cube-shaped*. They didn't have the Calfedea Trading sigil on them, and the people standing guard did not belong to the trading company either —they were well equipped and dressed in the gear expected of a knight's foot soldiers.

This stinks... Shame I can't get any closer.

Schnee wondered for a moment if this style was typical for the delivery of important goods out in the capital, albeit uncommon out west, but then she thought that most nobles wouldn't choose such spartan carriages for their work. Every curious bone in her body rebelled at the notion of leaving the scene, but the bubastisian couldn't do anything more at this moment. She decided to give up for now and managed to leave via the same route she came, unmolested.

"Whew... Now, I'm pretty certain they've got the goods loaded up in there," Schnee said to herself. She had learned a lot, but there was still so much she didn't know.

Now, the fact that this store was doing its job properly meant that the "celebratory goods" or whatnot were safely in storage waiting to be delivered. But those strange carriages tugged at the corner of her mind. Were these goods really so valuable that they needed to be so well protected? And if they were, it just seemed very odd that they would need to bulk up their forces with local adventurers.

"Looks like there ain't anything for it. I'll have ta put on my barmaid garb..."

There wasn't much time. Schnee assumed that the fastest, most fruitful avenue for fresh intelligence would be through the guards stationed to protect the carriages. It was impossible for anyone to stand at attention for twenty-four hours. If they were staying in Marsheim, then they would head to one of its taverns for a drink and

a rest. All she needed to do was tail them and maybe grease some wheels to hear an interesting story or two.

"All right, next up I should do myself up like a tortoiseshell... Tch, ain't great ta dye and redye so quickly... My poor fuzz."

The white cat hopped up from the street onto a roof, returned her Hollow Willow goods, and set out on her next investigation into this mystery.

[Tips] It doesn't take much skill to use makeup to disguise yourself. That goes especially for races whose full-body fur is a distinguishing feature. As long as they accept the extra effort, these races can disguise themselves with far more ease than a mensch.

"Slipping out of one skin and into another, huh..." I said.

"How dull. Is that any way to react to a lady?"

A hobby of mine was finding new places to try out. Searching for the next prime spot to unwind was a habit I'd picked up from my irregular work schedule under Lady Agrippina, but since becoming the boss of the Fellowship, I had taken it upon myself to find decent taverns where my people could rest up after a job. Think about it—if you made a habit of always going to the same place, then it was easy for someone to poison you or assault you on your way home once they worked out your schedule.

Hence my double take; here was a familiar face at a tavern I'd never bothered with before.

"They made quick work of getting you back out in the field," I said.

"Everywhere is understaffed. I also hear that the upper brass took quite the beating from you and your boss."

"Former boss," I said before making my order of some ale and a few snacks from the barmaid—or should I say, *Beatrix* dressed as a barmaid.



"I'm quite impressed that you knew I'd come here," I went on.

"Five of us had spread out to different locations to try and ferret you out," Beatrix replied. "I didn't think I'd find you on my first day at it, though."

Befitting her role, Beatrix had applied makeup to hide her tattoos and put on a far less showy barmaid's uniform, but I wasn't about to forget a face that had nearly been the last thing I'd ever seen. Plus, you know, you could set me up on a generous stepstool and she'd still be taller than me. If I didn't notice someone like her, then I could forever hang a sign from my neck that said: "My eyes are purely decorative."

I was impressed with her methods. She had chosen a tavern with no relation to the Fellowship. It was loud enough to muffle our conversation. There was nothing suspicious about a barmaid chatting up a guy on his own—even someone staking me out wouldn't think anything of it.

When my drink, wurst, and standard snack of roasted beans came over, I tipped her, as was proper etiquette. However, as I put the coins in her palm, I felt her pass a piece of folded paper back into mine.

"What's this?"

"A message from the upper brass," she said. "Don't go dying now."

A call from another table summoned her, and Beatrix dashed off with a cheerful "Coming!" and the awkward, hurried steps of a new hire. She really was good. That tottering hustle didn't convey a trace of her well-honed martial might, and what's more, she'd managed to conceal it in spite of her *replacement limbs*. From the different sounds that her left and right feet made, I imagined that she had probably got some kind of magical prosthetics, as opposed to having the lost limbs reattached.

Noting that there was no way in hell she'd settle for anything less than a prosthetic that made her *even deadlier*, I took a sip of my room-temperature ale—which I'd acclimated to by now.

"Mm... A full-bodied bitter taste. This is good stuff."

The deep amber liquid with its scant bubbles had been brought in

from a distant Wine God temple. The quality was good, and its taste was typical of southwestern Rhine, near my fair home of Konigstuhl. The faint sweetness and the bitter aftertaste were good. It was a bit strong, so I made a note that some of the more hard-drinking or just plain heavyweight Fellows would most likely enjoy it here. If most of them chugged down drinks at their usual pace, this would leave them on the floor pretty quickly.

I took a bite of the wurst, which made a satisfying crunch, and its salty goodness spread over my tongue. With my left hand, I opened the note from Beatrix. I felt a pulse of mana—this would probably self-immolate less than a minute after reading.

"But the beans... I prefer harder stuff," I mumbled to myself as I activated a super close-range Farsight to read the note. If I hadn't worked undercover for so long, I probably would've spat out the beans. The note was short: *The instigators live in the Krahenschanze*. Many different meanings could be read from it, but the twisting of my stomach made me feel like I might soon be reuniting with the mouthful of ale I'd just swallowed.

I see. Them, huh. That makes sense...

I had an inkling this might've been the case. When I was told that the celebratory goods were produced in the College, the gears had already been turning. Of course the College wouldn't be satisfied with milling out such boring fare. We were talking about a pack of amoral rationalist eggheads, after all. If they were involved, I could tell this gig was no good. Magia were technocrats—their profession married secret plots and magic wherever they possibly could. It made sense that *they* might be the type to voice their suggestions to the Emperor.

I surreptitiously wiped off the ash that the note had reduced itself too and downed my ale. I needed a few of these to get my brain ready and kicking.

"Another of the same, please," I called.

"Coming right up!"

Another barmaid came traipsing over; she had noticed the silver coins I'd placed in Beatrix's hand but hadn't noticed that this same woman had vanished from the tavern. It looked like Beatrix's entire

job had been to hand this note to me and leave. She was really a pro.

Ugh, the College, though? Really? I tried to tamper my bad feeling about this down with booze when someone else approached my table.

The calico bubastisian was wearing rather fancy clothes and had a yellow ribbon on her—an indicator that she was a woman of pleasure. I didn't recognize her. Maybe she was looking for a new client for the night.

"May I join you?" she asked.

"Sorry, I'm waiting for some—"

I gave my usual response when someone approached me with a mind to *do business*, so to speak, when the woman smiled at me with narrowed eyes...

"No... Schnee?"

"Yup. Didn't cotton on to me, eh?"

"Not at all..."

She looked completely different. Until her eyes went to how they always were, I wouldn't have recognized her.

"You found me pretty quickly too, huh..." I said.

"Me too...?"

"Oh, forget it."

That wasn't good—this second surprise had loosened my lips, although I didn't think I could be blamed.

"Now, Erich," Schnee said. "Does the word 'Aerotechnics' mean anything to ya?"

I couldn't help it—I finally spat out my ale.

Hold on just a second, please!

"Where did you hear that?!"

"I was chattin' with a knight who's scheduled ta join ya on your bodyguard mission. Sidled myself up onto his lap and delivered his booze right up to his lips, then he was oh so kind to share it with me. Anyhoo, fella said that the technical research institute was offerin' a reward for a job well done."

I wanted to strangle that idiot knight—half from simple frustration and the other half from my sense of responsibility after working

under a noble.

I get that a woman's charms are alluring, but how stupid can you be to blab about stuff to a stranger?! And Aerotechnics *at that?! That's the name people use for the operation my old boss runs now when they don't want to say "Institute for the Demonstration of Aeroship Technologies" every time!*

That group of weirdos was assembled by the count thaumapalatine herself without any regard for their cadre. They got off on the ecstasy of getting a huge hunk of wood and metal airborne and mobile. I mean, I couldn't say I *didn't get the appeal*, but there was just no way the sort of people who could put up with spending days on end testing and debugging and reengineering in the name of perfecting the tech could ever be *normal*.

Hearing that we might be guarding goods manufactured by that lot made me want to drop everything and run.

"Guy didn't let slip 'zactly what they'll be cartin' around, but he did say that it was something made with the help of the College."

"Why would some knight at the fringes know that? Ugh, that third-rate blabbermouth..."

"But other knightly folk let slip some other stuff... Same blabber about the College, but they were talkin' about *experiments*."

Schnee had single-handedly seduced multiple knights and had coaxed them into coughing up *state secrets*. I knew her build was specialized for information gathering, but it seemed she had a downright deadly Negotiation bonus too. I made a quick mental note not to let her get the upper hand on me...

"Hmm, that only leads to one thing," I said.

"They purposefully chose to shift something crooked?" Schnee said with narrowed eyes after ordering a drink.

I nodded. "Exactly. I think that the caravans are merely the bait for a trap."

"Ya think they're loadin' up goods that they *want* stolen, that they *want* to be attacked for?"

"I believe so. If they really didn't want it *not* to be stolen, then if Aerotechnics were involved, they would have sent over a couple polemurges, bare minimum."

Schnee tilted her head, asking what a "polemurge" was, so I told her. They were monsters who could single-handedly topple a satellite state if they so wished. They hadn't merely specialized in combat magic, nor were they hobbyists who liked to tinker with repurposing the fruits of their research for combat—they were magia, a whole level above, whose purpose in life as scientists and masters of the mystic arts was to attain total martial dominance. People like Lady Agrippina were so utterly broken that they made you lose sense of what was normal, but the Empire had a handful of folk who possessed a more reasonable amount of destructive firepower.

"If they wanted their goods to be stolen, then why did they need us to take it on?" I said. "That goes extra if the College is involved."

"Hm? You got a connection?" Schnee asked.

Yeah, a pretty big one.

However, it was best to leave that line where it lay for now. Lady Agrippina hadn't contacted me, after all. If there was some kind of scheme where she could get ahead if I were involved, then she would have sent at least one letter. I was pretty sure I wasn't such a useless piece to her that I could just be snipped off like that. Considering the source of this stink, it was nigh impossible for a warning from Lady Agrippina to come *after* Marquis Donnersmarck. That utter demon wouldn't do such a sloppy job.

If Lady Agrippina meant to put me to work, she would have done something during the preliminary stages of all this. She was a reasonably well-practiced schemer, and I knew she was the type to brute force her way into the dominant position before anyone could get in edgewise. Count Ubiorum could win any game she wished without such roundabout methods. It wasn't her style to weave together all these sticky plots. It was like how you wouldn't bother opening a letter with your nail if you had a pair of scissors already.

"Guess we'll throw ourselves at it, then..." I said.

"You can't use that connection of yours?"

"It'll only complicate things. It wouldn't be fair to the people of Marsheim either."

For a single moment, I'd considered making a secret report, but this job had come from the administration here in Marsheim. Lady

Agrippina wasn't all too interested in things in the western reaches, and if she got involved it was pretty likely she would use more efficient and heavy-handed measures instead of bringing the mess to a safe landing. The wheels were already in motion. If I asked for help now, she might view this as the perfect opportunity to deliver a second serving of subterfuge.

In that case, I would feel a lot better if I used my own sword to cut us a path through the mire. I'd agreed I'd protect the caravans, so I would do just that.

When I'd last seen Miss Nakeisha, she had said that Marquis Donnersmarck wished for peace in Ende Erde, and now Beatrix had passed me information. That meant he didn't want me dead, or there was something that simply meant he didn't want this to succeed.

I was just about seeing the picture behind the scenes, but there was no obligation for us to dance to their tune. If they had truly flung us a "No hard feelings, but..." job, then it was worth letting them know that around here you couldn't complain if you were killed in retaliation.

"This is the first big job in a while," I said. "The entirety of the Fellowship of the Blade shall take on this challenge with fangs sharpened."

"Holy moly, that's a scary face! A mensch ain't meant to smile like that, Erich."

I gave a wolfish grin, but it only made Schnee flinch back in her chair.

[Tips] If you wanted Result A, but assigned the job to adventurers who would work toward Result B, you have no one to blame but yourself if you don't get the result you want.

On the day of departure, with our horses in line and an impressive formation on foot, we made our way to the meeting point.

All thirty of our Fellows were clad in gear bearing our clan

insignia. Along with them were thirty-odd more trial members, including Yorgos, all dressed in looted gear. Everyone was equipped and ready for the job ahead. To top it off, we had a small light cavalry formation—including my beloved Dioscuri, one zentaur, and six other horses. I was proud of us—we were imposing enough to put the knights with the carriages to shame.

"Company, dismount!" I called. "I, Goldilocks Erich, and the Fellowship of the Blade—sixty-four strong—have arrived to lend our aid to your request."

"Very good. I appreciate your aid."

The one who replied to me was Sir Tarutung, an orc. This knight was thinner than your average orc—still absolutely huge compared to a mensch, mind—and his slight stature allowed him to ride a horse. He was the supreme commander and all-around head honcho for this operation.

From what Schnee had told me, I'd expected a third-rate knight, but he looked like quite the warrior. He had a well-trained bulk, his steely muscles sheathed under a protective layer of fat. His underlings and cavalry seemed well trained too, and I could tell his position was backed up with confidence and experience.

"Your tales have reached the capital," Sir Tarutung said. "I expect your work to live up to them."

"Yes, sir," I said. "I promise not to embarrass you while under your leadership."

I snapped my heels together as I did a salute and all my Fellows followed suit. Sir Tarutung saluted us back. Maybe he wasn't looking down on us as much as I'd thought.

"Now then, let us have a meeting before we depart."

"Sir."

The meeting point was in a plain a short distance from Marsheim's walls. With thirty carriages, it was quite the troupe. Some of the carriages had the margrave's family crest—that of a leaping horse—and others were supplied by other merchants with their own logos. Most of them did not contain stock, instead containing supplies for our large number. It was quite the motley arrangement. We almost looked like a small army going on a training

expedition.

"Now then, the time is..." Sir Tarutung said. As soon as the orc's eyes landed on the dawn sky, the morning bell rang. "Very good. I shall open the sealed missive now. No qualms, Sir Lazne?"

"None. You may do as we were ordered."

The meeting took place in a simple tent without a roof. Inside were a few knights; the one that Sir Tarutung called out to must have been the vice commander. Sir Lazne was a mensch, and with his well-braided beard and facial appearance that suggested roots in the east, I imagined he had been dispatched out here today for the job.

"All right. Our route first takes us to Namur, where we will off-load our stock. After that we will be able to open the next sealed letter."

The fact that they had received sealed orders that couldn't be opened until a certain time to reveal the next destination indicated to me that the client was really taking all possible safety measures. This only served to heap more fuel atop my burning suspicions.

"At Namur, we will hand over the celebratory goods to Viscount Herbin. At the same time, we will also deliver construction materials and also take up more stock to transport."

That answered my questions about what was up with all the carriages that weren't carrying our victuals. Apparently we'd be running out a bunch of excess building supplies from central Rhine to fortify military outposts at most of our stops.

"Our schedule gets us there in three days, but with a quick march, we can manage it in two," Sir Tarutung said.

"But why, Sir Tarutung?" Sir Lazne said. "That will only serve to exhaust not only our troops, but also the merchants."

"I understand your concern, Sir Lazne. I've received a worrying report from the observatory. Apparently the weather will take a turn for the worst at the end of spring."

Interesting. The fact that he was also taking local meteorology reports into account showed me that he wasn't a poor commander.

You could never fully predict how the end of spring was going to play out in Rhine; the fluctuations in temperature meant that the

only thing you could count on was that you'd be thrown some kind of curveball. There was no rainy season in the Empire, but the crapshoot weather made the transition from spring to summer a headache and a half. Sir Tarutung's desire to move things quicker indicated that perhaps the God of Wind and Clouds had angered the Harvest Goddess. There was always a small delay when Her anger boiled over, apparently out of consideration for the farmers so they could get the first phases of the sowing done first. Something foul must have happened up in the heavens.

"We're moving with a group of over three hundred. I don't want anyone getting sick, you see," Sir Tarutung said.

"Understood. I'll administer the requisite swift kicks in the breeches if I hear any grumbling."

And so, our caravan of three hundred people and thirty carriages set off on a lively but peaceful start of our journey. Our first destination was Namur—a midsized town in the Marsheim region overseen by Viscount Herbin, who had been dispatched from central Rhine. On the books it was home to around eight thousand; the real count was closer to twenty thousand. It mostly stood out for producing some pretty decent woodworking. As benign as it seemed, I stayed on my toes.

[Tips] The weather is divined through astrological means in Erich's world, as opposed to observing the movements of the weather itself, and yields far more accurate results.

There was something that I could never get used to even as the years went by: the job of just *sitting around* because I was the one in charge.

"I just can't sit still..." I muttered.

At the moment, I was sitting on a foldable stool by the city's outer wall as I watched the goods get delivered. Everyone was bustling about, hurrying to deliver the stock, and I was sitting on my hands, waiting for my cue. I knew it was the job of the overseer to merely watch, but I didn't like it.

"Did something happen?" Mika asked.

"No, just my peasant upbringing showing. It's painful for me to just watch while others are at work."

"You really don't change, huh?"

Mika let out a laugh that sounded like a chiming bell, but I couldn't do anything about it. I was a farmer's son, used to spending my spare moments dashing about, wringing what pleasure I could from them. Sitting in silence was *agonizing*. That went especially for the moments when my allies and subordinates were at work scouting or remaining on guard.

"Try your best to sit still, okay? Everyone is able to work without worrying exactly because you are here."

"I know, I know..."

That wasn't the only thing on my mind. Something was going to happen on this job, but it hadn't yet, and that made me uneasy.

Today was the tenth day since we'd set off, and we were now in our third town. We were traveling at a bit of a lick; the journey so far had passed by with no real trouble, and the loading and off-loading of our stock came and went without any issue. It was almost going *too* well.

None of our carriages had gotten stuck in any muck, none of their axles had broken; no local lords or any bandits had attacked us, most likely put off by our number and our Imperial banner. However, as the empty days passed, I felt that the God of Trials would soon show up to pay us back with interest, as if saying, "You've had time enough to cool your heels, haven't you?"

There were also a number of fishy things going on that concerned me. In particular, as I continued to watch the carriages swap places as their load was taken out in turn, watching the workers swap out, I noticed something odd. The carriage bearing what Sir Tarutung called "particularly important magic tools," which Schnee had also told me about, had not once been off-loaded.

Supplies had been delivered to the carriage a few times per day, so I was sure that there were people there, but it was just too weird that they hadn't actually *left* the carriage once in these past ten days. However, with my responsibility as this troupe's bodyguard, it would be too strange for me to ask who might be on board. I

continued to pay attention to it, highlighting it as the center of potential trouble, but since nothing had actually *become of it* yet I was starting to feel a bit worn out.

I finally pulled out my pipe, but as soon as I did, I heard a *tink* as something collided with it.

"Hm?"

"Oh?"

I looked up at the sky, assuming that it was rain. It had been cloudy all morning, and I'd been a bit anxious that we wouldn't be able to finish our work here before it started pouring.

"Yeow?!"

"Are you okay, Erich?!"

Something entered my eye, and I clapped a hand to my face in reaction. I blinked out the tears and raised my other hand to see what hit me. In my hand was a piece of ice about the size of a grain of sand. It wasn't snow—it was hail.

"No, no, no... You're joking?!"

The hail started to get heavier and bigger. Before I knew it, the hail had gotten large enough to hurt and everyone had started to panic.

"Dammit! Calm down, everyone! Stop with the deliveries! Make sure the stock doesn't get wet and seek shelter inside the carriages!" I called.

As I gave my orders, my old chum crafted a physical barrier which we found shelter under. With each blink of an eye, the hail had grown—now it was too large to hold and started to pound onto the ground and the carriages.

"Crap! The fabric on the carriage has ripped!"

"Protect your heads! Helmets on!"

"Someone grab me a shield! Protect the goods with your lives!"

"Gah, the horses are starting to panic!"

"The hell are you doing?! Get them under the trees, quickly! Get a move on!"

Everyone bustled about as they set to task. Working quickly so that they wouldn't be thrashed by the hail, they tried to protect themselves and the stock, but... *Dammit!* The day laborers were

making a dash for it! Was it only us Fellows who could work properly?! *Spineless bastards—do the work you're being paid for!*

"The hell are we gonna do about this?! Dammit, God of Wind and Clouds, why now?!"

I couldn't help but shout out. The hail was so huge that a video of this would make rounds on social media, and it didn't look like it was going to let up. If He had been playing with fire with the Silverglaze Goddess—who presided over all things cold—then I would hold a grudge!

In the end, we couldn't get back to work. Repairing the tents and checking over everything for damage had set us back enormously.

[Tips] After a desperate struggle between the Harvest Goddess and the Silverglaze Goddess, the Harvest Goddess married the God of Wind and Clouds. However, when hail and sleet fall when the weather should be warm, people suspect that it is because He is cheating on Her.

To speak on behalf of the God of Wind and Clouds, He is a devout and loving husband.

Mid-Campaign Clash

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In systems where the GM needs to either weaken overly strong PCs before the climax or give them the motivation to give it their all, the mid-campaign clash can act as a decent warm-up bout. This battle usually indicates that the scenario is finally progressing in a more dangerous direction.

"I feel like I get why you train us like you do now," Martyn said in the roadhouse yard as he stared at the fat raindrops coming down.

"Right? There are times where you need to set out on days like this," I replied.

We'd managed to finish the delivery despite the poor weather, but even now, a few days afterward, the weather hadn't let up enough for us to pack up and ship out. The hail stopped after half a day, but torrential rain took its place. The bridge we were meant to cross had been destroyed by the raging river, and now our departure was five days behind schedule. Sir Tarutung—obviously under a great deal of stress—had made the decision to set off despite the weather. We had about enough wiggle room in the schedule for this delay, but any more waiting and our next arrival would be hugely late, with cascading consequences. We could delay no longer. You could *march* in rain, at least, even if it would be miserable the whole time, and so last night Sir Tarutung announced we would be leaving.

"I wish he would change his mind, though. The horses hate this weather," Martyn replied.

"Horses and us are alike there. You've got a good hand with them. Try and get them to calm down."

Martyn cast a despondent look at the sky. With the harnesses in

his hands, it looked like he was in the process of heading off to the stables to fit up the Fellowship's horses.

Although it hadn't been all too long since Dietrich had arrived, her lessons had apparently borne fruit. My Fellows' horse-riding skills had gone from "holding on for dear life" to battle-ready. All the same, horses were temperamental beasts, and Martyn's steed in particular hated the rain. I watched Martyn walk off with heavy footsteps.

Although the animals were doing what we asked, it was important not to forget that *we* were the ones making the demands. I felt sorry for them—they wanted to spend a day as terrible as this out of the rain just as much as we did.

"Erich. I've scouted the road ahead."

"Thank you, Margit. It must've been horrible out there."

I took a break from watching the downpour, no less unhappy about our prospects than Martyn, and turned to see our party's scout and a number of her disciples. They looked like drowned rats, despite their rain cloaks—cute things that made them look like teru teru bozu. The group had just been out to check on the bridge ahead. A stone bridge was reliable but couldn't be fully trusted in weather as terrible as this. I wanted to make sure that we weren't wasting time taking that route, and I could tell the state of things from her expression.

"The other bridge was in one piece, then?" I said.

"Yes. *Luckily.*"

Margit looked utterly despondent. I could tell that she had been hoping that the bridge would be out and we wouldn't have to set out in this mess. I felt the same. The Fellowship were only charged with bodyguard duties and overseeing the loading and off-loading of the stock. We wouldn't be blamed if we were late, and our wages came out of our daily rate; in other words, delays wouldn't cost us anything. It made me question Sir Tarutung's decisions, but that didn't have anything to do with me. I understood that Imperial bureaucrats loved efficiency and precision, but I wished we didn't have to do anything crazy.

"Don't you worry about that. If it's looking a bit unstable, I can

reinforce it," said a voice from near the carriages. It was Mika. He had just finished reinforcing their axles and putting water-repellent enchantments on the fabric. "While it won't be possible to build a new bridge in this weather, I can make sure an existing one will try just that bit harder to help us across."

"I'm counting on you, old chum."

"Gladly. One of the things I can be proud about throughout this little life is that I've not fallen short of my old pal's expectations just yet."

Mika was the paragon of reliability. To top it off, he was going to cast water-repellent and cold-prevention charms on our Fellows' rain gear. I couldn't thank him enough for agreeing to come with us. If he weren't here, who knew how much worse our delays would be?

"Erich, our prep's pretty much done," my comrade called out.

"Thanks, Siegfried. And our Fellows?"

"They're bitchin' but they're movin', so don't worry. Their opinion of that knight's hit rock bottom, though."

Siegfried and Kaya joined us too. They were in charge of our Fellows, and fortunately it looked like things were going to plan.

I was less than thrilled about setting out in this weather too, so I couldn't blame them for their grumbling toward Sir Tarutung. We'd put a lot of faith in him, signing on with his whole operation; he was obliged to appreciate our service. This kind of weather would've forced your average adventurer to break contract and head home.

"But I do wonder," Mika said. "Are we really carting around something so important we have to go to all this effort?"

"We just have to suck it up," I replied. "Whether a knight or a noble, they're all bureaucrats. To them there is nothing more important than a job going smoothly and a deadline safely kept. No matter what it is we're carrying."

The proverb "wretched is the lot of a government official" was never truer than now. If we reported that the bridge we intended to use was broken or that the weather was too terrible to head out in, we'd just be reprimanded for poor excuses. This wasn't all too different from my experiences back in my past life. The trains were delayed *once* and my asshole boss moaned at me, saying that I

should've just left home earlier to make up for the delays. This was probably the first big job that the baron—our client—had ever been trusted with, so he was probably nervous, but he seemed like the type to complain just like any other noble.

"Man, that carriage sure is suspicious," I went on.

"Did you watch over it while I was gone?" Margit asked.

"Of course. People were standing guard even when it was pouring buckets. Poor folk."

The wind had changed direction and was now blowing the rain under the eaves. I took a step back, brushed the droplets off me, and took out my pipe for one final smoke before we headed out. While I was the picture of relaxation, those poor foot soldiers standing guard beside that reinforced carriage looked absolutely pitiful. They were wearing heavy armor; it must have been waterlogged by now. I hoped none of them would catch a cold.

Schnee had warned us about the suspicious carriages, and I had made sure we had kept an eye on them since setting off. I had picked out one in particular, and today it was as suspicious as ever. As I watched a set number of people deliver supplies to it every so often each day and saw that nothing too large was ever put inside, even though I wasn't sure what was inside, I had settled upon one theory: That carriage was carrying people. I'd seen food delivered to it. If there were people inside, it would figure that nothing would enter or leave. Magic could satisfy their plumbing needs, at least in the short term. With these thoughts in mind, my theory didn't seem all too unlikely.

"I'll be paying particular attention to it today," I went on. "I mean, look at the weather."

"You really are a worrywart. Do you think that even this rain is a trap?"

"No way," I laughed at Margit's little jab.

Weather was very much the realm of the gods. Although the pantheon's jurisdiction was sometimes a bit vague and we were in the boondocks of the western reaches, we still fell under the control of the Empire's pantheon. This was something you couldn't easily write over with spells or what have you. If you started being

suspicious of something like this, then everything else would become suspicious too. It made things easier to know that at least I could put some faith in the weather.

Granted, there were people who used the weather in their fortune telling, like the Shinonome lot, so I couldn't be absolutely one hundred percent certain.

"But this weather makes the perfect camouflage for traps. Tell everyone to remain on guard," I went on.

I blew out a plume of smoke, which vanished in the roaring wind before it could even form properly. Vision was poor, sounds were covered up, smells were mixed in with the rain and mud. If something was going to happen, it would be today. I prayed that this would all end with people laughing at me for being a bit oversensitive.

[Tips] Control of the weather is an important role undertaken by the gods. The College only performs experiments on the weather within the safety of the indoors. In the past, hundreds of temple knights set out to hunt down all who dipped a toe into such a realm of taboo. Ever since then, they have learned their lesson.

The sound of the explosion came through a muffling blanket of rain. For a moment, the rain was blown aside, creating an empty vortex, but it was only when the wind rushed to fill it in again that I realized what had just taken place at the front of the caravan.

"A-An explosion?! What happened?!" I shouted.

We were at the banks of a deep river, about thirty minutes away from the town if you were a scout like Margit, but over two hours if you were a trudging caravan.

The explosion occurred just as the first carriages—filled with less-important goods—were about to head onto the bridge. There was a muffled boom, a scattering of rain, and screams and horses whinnying a short moment later. It was only when I noticed that bits of wood and metal were mixed into the rain that it dawned on me that the carriages in front had been blown to pieces.

"A report! The two carriages at the front are lost!"

"Damn it all! Everyone gather together! Assume defensive positions!"

What the hell was going on?! Margit had gone ahead to check the bridge to make sure it was safe, and the surrounding area had been reclaimed, meaning there was nowhere nearby anyone could hide. The river itself was so swollen with rainwater that it would be dangerous for even water-dwellers to conceal themselves there.

Just after I warned my people, with the fear that maybe a drake or something had attacked us, I heard another explosion from the rear.

"We're under attack! Protect the carriages!"

That was when I realized that no creature was responsible for this—this was the work of people. If a drake or another fire-breather had decided on a whim to attack us, they wouldn't so craftily block us from advancing *and* retreating. They were violence made manifest and would assault us head-on until everything was laid to waste. Only someone planning from the jump to corner us would have come up with this approach.

"Keep the carriages together! If we run, we'll only make a better tar—"

"We gotta get outta here!"

"Grah, damn it all!"

The driver of the carriage nearest me fell into a full-blown panic and snapped his reins to dash off as quickly as he could. I understood the desire to run after being thrown into chaos, but could they calm down a little?!

"Etan!" I said. "I don't care who you have to knock out, but we need to regain some control of everyone!"

"Roger! What'll you do, Boss?"

"I'll find the knights and get to putting out fires. I need to make sure Sir Tarutung is safe."

I left the central carriages to Etan and dashed to the head of the caravan—knocking out fleeing drivers on the way. Sir Tarutung was the head honcho of this operation, so he and his horse were at the front of the troupe.

“Sir Tarutung! Where are you? Sir Tarutung!” I yelled, trying to get my voice heard over the roaring rain.

When I made it to the front of the caravan, I found a horrible sight. The earth had been carved out... No, it looked like it had exploded from *within*, scattering bits of person and carriage around, resulting in grisly chaos that was impossible to take control of. Good gods, of course Margit couldn’t have noticed—it was a land mine spell that had been embedded into the ground to eliminate the carriages! I’d heard whispers back at the College that such a thing had been developed, but at the time it had been too difficult to work out how to set the thing off and ensure it could distinguish between friend and foe. The story went that the developers had decided that it’d be an *insane* tool to use if you couldn’t make that kind of spell selective, and so it’d been mothballed before it had ever left the planning stage.

Someone with looser standards must have cribbed their idea, or else they’d devised a similar spell independently. Its power was painfully evident in all the people lying around, grievously wounded.

“Sir Tarutung!”

“V-Von Tarutung’s sustained a heavy wound!” a foot soldier called back. “We need a doctor! Is there a doctor anywhere?!”

I leaped off of Castor and went to him, but...there was no hope for him.

Sir Tarutung let out a few pained coughs. “M-Mister...Erich...?”

“Sir Tarutung, please hold on! We’ve been attacked!”

I grabbed his hand and called out to him. His huge stomach had been crushed by a carriage, most likely knocked over during the explosion. His guts had all remained on the inside, but they were pretty visibly not arranged in the same order (or intact, for that matter). It spoke of his incredible endurance that he hadn’t died from the shock, but he wouldn’t last much longer at all.

“I-I leave command...to you... The carriage... Protect...the iron carriage...”

“So there *is* something inside?!”

“I... I leave this...to...”

Before he could finish talking, Sir Tarutung’s hand, covered in

marks from intense training, fell into the mud.

Gods damn it all! I've lost my biggest source of intel!

"M-Mister Erich! What should we do?"

"Gather everyone back together! We'll assemble at the center of the caravan."

"And the wounded?"

"We don't have the time to take care of them right now! We've had our head and our ass blown to pieces, we need to—"

Another explosion ruptured the air. My left ear rang worryingly. I covered it and looked over to where the sound came from to see our carriages at the center of the procession had also been attacked. Soon after I heard war cries. This was bad—they had struck at our flank in the chaos!

"I'll head to the middle and fend off the attackers! Take the survivors and join me when you can."

I hopped back onto Castor and dashed across the mud. Despite the terrible terrain, my beloved horse shot like an arrow to the battleground. The rain made vision poor. The battle cry had come from the left side from my vantage point at the front of the parade, so I knew that's where the enemy was, but I couldn't get a grasp of the shape of things and— *Whoa!*

Another powerful gust of wind brought with it something that collided into my side. I looked down. It was a man dressed in smart armor. Or at least his torso.

"Oh crap! You okay?" a certain zentaur called out.

"Dietrich! Watch where you're sending your enemies flying!"

The offender was none other than Dietrich. She was in front of a line of Fellows, arranged in formation to prevent anyone from getting past with their lives, and was dealing with a small army of enemies all on her own. She had used that halberd—a deadly mallet, hammer, and spear all in one—to repel the incoming forces and had managed to wrest off a man's upper body with a single blow.

"What's their number?" I shouted to her.

"I dunno!" she called back. "But they're trying to cause as much chaos as they can. They're not marching in formation, just attacking at random!"

It was bad that we didn't have their head count, but my Fellows were working together and hadn't broken yet. The enemy had underestimated them. We were *sworn* to the sword; we earned our bread and oil spilling blood. We needed to show them we weren't just some motley pack of amateurs bobbling about in our armor!

"Into battle!" I roared.

"It's the boss! He's returned!"

"Get your heads in gear! We're going to crush them all!"

I stood at the front of the formation with Schutzwolfe in hand and looked at my Fellows—and some of the knightly retinue who had ended up here too—and gave my order. The enemy relied on speed and confusion; we would destroy them head-on and repel their foolish assault.

"CHARGE!"

"RAAAAAAH!"

I raised my sword, and my people roared and charged at the enemy like a pack of starved beasts. We met them in no time at all, and soon metal struck flesh in the heated fray.

"They're not bad!"

"Gang up on them two to one! Hrah!"

"Die, ya bastard!"

One after another, the enemy fell to my Fellows' sword skills, their beautiful teamwork, and their polished weapons. With a ferocity befitting a werewolf, Mathieu led his unit and purposefully took a blow to give them an opening to strike. Karsten rallied the smaller races under him and used their speed to toy with the enemy. Etan used his huge body and weapon to crush enemy and armor all at once in a fine display.

"Ngh... Dietrich, I need you this way!" I said.

"Why? We're winning, but they're not total pushovers!" she replied.

"If they're attacking from the left, they'll come from the right too. You and me, we'll defend our other flank!"

"Seriously? Ugh, fine, whatever! You and your demands..."

This was standard procedure for this kind of ambush. They crushed our head to stop us advancing, then destroyed our behind

to prevent us from fleeing before attacking our sides—with a small time delay between each side—while we were defenseless. The bastards would resort to this tried and tested method, I was certain.

"Gurgh?!"

"No... Help m— Agh!"

Crap, we're too late!

As I cut through the small fry to join up with Dietrich, I heard screams from the carriages. The drivers of two of the iron carriages had been slaughtered, and now the enemy were moving to next kill the drivers of the third iron carriage.

"Noooo!"

The driver of the third of the iron carriages, terrified at seeing his colleagues so mercilessly killed, was trying to make a dash for it. The enemy was doing a great job, churning through our loose and ill-marshaled allies!

"I'm not so great at fighting on horseback, but screw it," I muttered, urging Castor into a gallop as I readied Schutzwolfe. The trick wasn't to swing, but to keep the sword in place and make use of your movement. I sliced through the neck of the enemy assaulting the remaining carriage driver, and a shimmer of red was soon lost in the rain.

"Dietrich, don't destroy the carriage!"

"You don't gotta...tell me!"

Dietrich dexterously spun her halberd and took down three enemies in one swing with all the ease of a child tossing their teddy bear. Sure, some of it came down to the natural virtues of her polearm, but her incredible strength made me feel weedy and jealous. Without magic, I was stuck at extreme close range and capable of felling only one enemy at a time.

"Driver! Don't run! You're safer if you stay here! Got it?!" I said to the third carriage's driver, giving a curt order that would hopefully reach his flustered brain.

"Y-Yessir!" he spluttered as he whimpered and let go of his reins. He was evidently unused to blood or fighting. Now I didn't need to worry about keeping the remaining iron carriages from fleeing, but I still needed to chase after the one that had.

"What the *hell*, man?!"

"Siegfried!"

"I thought I was gonna die!"

Just as I was wondering where I should go next, Siegfried came dashing in with the people from the rear of the caravan. He must have heard the sounds of battle and decided this was where the heart of the battle was.

My comrade was covered in mud and soot. I had tasked him with keeping watch over the rear of the troupe, so he must have been near the second explosion. He looked all in one piece, but he must've been close; his beloved scale armor was filthy. His luck might have been terrible for placing him so close to the explosion, but it was also incredible for allowing him to emerge alive, let alone unscathed.

"How many did you bring?" I said.

"Just over twenty. We had to abandon the food and other stock at the back though," he replied.

"Understood. I'll leave the right flank to you! One of the iron carriages bolted for it."

"They did?! Tch, this is why you shouldn't give an amateur the reins!"

The enemy's assault was still ongoing, so it was really encouraging to have Siegfried, ten Fellows, and ten more, some of whom were part of a knight's retinue. This would free me up to chase after that carriage.

I had a bad feeling. Or rather, a bad *premonition*. You see, there were *four* iron carriages, and there must have been a reason why they had all been reinforced and fixed up to look the same. Despite there being many suspicious carriages, three of them were merely camouflage. Only one of them contained the real cargo. Judging by my splendid luck, I was pretty certain that the one that was missing, which had most likely escaped during the chaos, was the one with the real cargo. It was as certain as a domesticated pearl oyster would be to have a treasure inside.

"Boss, what's happening?!"

"Martyn! You came at the perfect time."

Our light cavalry unit who I'd sent ahead to scout across the bridge had come back! In total there were six Fellows and five noble subordinates, all on horseback—more than enough to catch that carriage.

"I'll explain later," I went on. "Sir Tarutung ordered me to protect the iron carriages, but one of the drivers got spooked and made a run for it. We need to get to it before the enemy does. Now, follow me!"

I left my other units to protect the flanks of the caravan, freeing up our speedy cavalry to do this chase mission. I left things to Siegfried and dashed off, cutting through the enemy as I went.

"Eep! Go away... Go away!"

The final iron carriage came into sight. It had four horses pulling it, but with all of its reinforcements, it couldn't go all that fast. Some of our enemies had grabbed onto the carriage's body. Their grip was strong, and the driver's attempts to kick them off failed, his heel merely sliding down the carriage's armored flank.

Trailing behind was the enemy cavalry—sixteen of them, and tough bastards by the look of it.

"Dietrich, help the driver!"

"You got it!"

"Everyone else, follow me. Chaaarge!"

Fights between cavalry resembled dogfights somewhat. You tried to get behind the other person and whoever got the advantageous position would win. Unless you were charging at one another, you would end up circling the other, waiting for your chance to strike. However, this was a *chase*. The enemy hadn't imagined we would recover so quickly and bring our own cavalry to boot. They weren't ready.

I loosened my grip on Castor's reins and sped up. Going as fast as I could, I allowed my sword to lop off the head of the defenseless rider. The blade entered the nape of his neck, slipping between a gap in his vertebrae, and came out from his throat. I didn't need to touch anything but his flesh and veins to send his head tumbling away. There was no need to even check the kill. I swapped my sword over to my left hand and cut at the new last person in the

chase. The rain must have masked our arrival—his neck was begging to be cut.

As the second head went flying, they finally noticed us, but they couldn't do much with us right on their tail. People aren't built with the range of motion to attack behind them, and—

"Crap!"

My reflexes kicked in, and I cut down a bolt that had been loosed at me.

The enemy had Eastern-style crossbows, the rich bastards! That asshole had locked in with his stirrup and twisted his body behind to fire without hesitation. In this poor visibility, I would've been hit, had I not reacted so quickly. I heard a crashing sound behind me. From the angle, one of the noble's subordinates must've been hit by a bolt. This is what happened when you chased cavalry; you couldn't rest easy unless you could trust that the people who had your back were just as deft at avoiding harm as you.

"Boss, go on ahead!" Martyn yelled.

"Don't let me stop you! This is your chance to go for the glory!"

We sped up and assumed a less vulnerable formation as we continued to cut down our foes. Our light cavalry under Martyn had hooks on their breastplates to rest their lances, which they used to attack our foes despite the distance. It was a wonderful scene that showed the fruits of their training, but something felt missing. I didn't want to be the kind of haughty person who said that this was too *easy*—rather, it felt like there was too little screaming, too little blood for a battlefield...

As I cut down my third person, I glanced at Schutzwolfe and shuddered. Her fang was covered in blood. This would have been normal, but with my speed and the method of my cut, there shouldn't have been any blood on the blade! Not only that, but it was also persistently sticky and was refusing to run off despite the onslaught of rain, painful on my face given Castor's hearty clip. It wasn't fresh—no, this was old and oxidized...

"Ah... Crap!"

No good! My reflexes had slowed due to my drifting thoughts. I hadn't been hit *yet,* but one of our foes up in front had drawn a

strange tube from their bag and slung it over their shoulder, and the sight of it felt like a dread omen.

I needed to act fast. I needed to make it in time.

I didn't care if Castor threw me off; I forced him to stop and I felt the whiplash run through me. With a few hopping gallops, he came to an incredible halt.

Thanks to that, I was alive.

I had avoided the backblast from the back end of the tube as it fired off its charge...practically vaporizing the carriage ahead of us.

Blood and thunder! What fucking lunatic had the bright idea to tinker up a magic tool preloaded with anti-tank *spells?!*

The explosion and the shock wave that rippled through my hair told me that this weapon was a simple but distant cousin of your run-of-the-mill anti-materiel grenade launcher. Of course, it had been amplified with magic. The mechanics hinged on the same simple physics my own combat magic exploited. It must have taken an inspired and twisted mind to dream up man-portable cannon this far ahead of the tech curve. They'd even compensated for the recoil by providing an exhaust pipe for all that burning gas and pressurized air to escape through.

A weapon like this was a simple leap of logic for a mage and easy to create—far simpler than freezing objects in space or diving into shadows, that was for sure.

"Holy crap! That scared the crap outta me!" Dietrich yelled.

She had instinctively used the axe end of her halberd as a makeshift shield, absorbing the impact and debris. While she had protected her face and torso, her horse half was covered in painful looking scratches from the flying shrapnel.

"How dare they do this to a young maiden's skin? They're going to pay!"

Her anger boiled over quickly and exploded forth. The horseman that had used the grenade launcher was the last one left, so she threw her halberd right at him. I'd already seen how quickly she could spin that thing before, but now it drew blurring circles of its afterimages in the air—it didn't even slow down as it reduced the last rider to chunky salsa.

Hooooly crap, talk about scary... The sight was a grim reminder that the inside of a human being was mostly a whole lot of steaming garbage, once you scrambled it up and laid it out for the world to see.

"Well done for pulling through, Dietrich!" I said.

"My ears are ringing. One pace closer and I would've been toast," she muttered. "The driver was thrown off somewhere..."

That grenade launcher thing looked like honest-to-goodness US Army Surplus munitions, but its blast radius was far smaller than the real thing. Fortunately Dietrich managed to get off with some tinnitus and a few scrapes, and the carriage wasn't *completely* destroyed. It was lying on its side with a big hole in the middle. The driver had been flung to the ground about thirty paces away. He had hit the ground with enough force to kill him, leaving his top half twisted.

"Damn it all... Who's going to take responsibility for all this?"

I scratched at my drenched hair as the complaint slipped from my lips. Whatever or whoever was in that carriage was definitely beyond saving. The battle cries of my allies from afar made my head ache as they reminded me of the losses we'd suffered.

Sir Tarutung, our commander in chief, was dead, and I didn't know if the vice commander, Sir Lazne, was still kicking. We Fellows were most likely fine, but I couldn't laugh at our casualties, having lost almost ten carriages and many lives.

Where the hell had these guys sprung up from? It was highly doubtful that Margit would have missed them when she was scouting ahead for safety. But the proof was in the pudding—we had been attacked. I wondered what clever exploit or gimmick they'd figured out to pull it off?

"Boss! We've just finished mopping up. There are no survivors."

"Is that right? Good work, Martyn."

"I think the other Fellows are finishing up too. Your magician friend was incredible. He turned the mud into a veritable swamp. Buried dozens in one breath."

Mika had also been on the other side of the river waiting for us, since he had finished fixing up the bridge. I needed to thank him for

joining back up with us and saving our bacon. He'd personally spared us a great many losses.

Shame about the carriage...

Just as that thought came to mind, I heard the slapping sound of mud. I spun around and saw a woman. Despite having been nigh buried in mud, her platinum blonde hair shone as she crawled out of the ruined carriage. She had slightly drooping eyes with a strong fire behind them and sharp features—common among the local lords and colloquially called a "barbaric face" in spite of her noble air. However, this wasn't the only striking thing about this mensch woman. The left side of her face was covered in a black leather eye patch, and she was wearing a straitjacket. All of this was so at odds with her beautiful looks—she retained her aura of pride despite the mud—that it left her cutting an entirely singular figure.

"Who are—"

"He's still inside... You have to save him," she said.

I had been right. This carriage wasn't carrying showy baubles for some noble brat's coming-of-age. Using her remaining strength, this woman had clambered out of the carriage and, deprived of the use of her arms, jabbed her chin back toward it.

"The furniture inside was flung about, and he hurt his leg. If you save him, I shall forgive you for this misconduct," she went on.

"All right," I said after a brief pause. "Martyn, help the man inside!"

"Y-Yes, Boss! I'll also send for Big Sis Kaya!"

Martyn headed to the carriage and I crouched down next to the noble-looking woman to help her up.

"I am Erich of Konigstuhl, an adventurer tasked with protecting this caravan."

"An adventurer? A lowly adventurer was found fit to protect *me*?"

Her words were less spiky and more filled with *disdain*.

"If I may, could I ask your name?" I said.

"I am Ferlin. Ferlin Sechstia de Ledea Dyne. The last remaining descendant of the great Justus de A Dyne."

Reader, feel free to praise me for not falling over unconscious on the spot after hearing that name.

According to her, she was related to *the* Justus de A Dyne, the deceased high king and local lord whose head (or a statue of it) decorated the Justus Imperial Baths.

[Tips] "De A Dyne" is an honorable family name which, in the old language of Ende Erde, refers to both an individual and an ancient power. This family had influence in the western peripheries, and a de A Dyne once ruled as high king. Records state that the last of the family all died in the field during the Fifth Battle of Marsheim.

"That's the end of my report, Sir Lazne," I said.

"What..." Sir Lazne muttered.

"Yes?"

"What the hell do you expect me to do?!"

If I had been permitted, I would have wanted to pat this poor knight's shoulder, in the hopes it might curb his wailing. His superior officer had died in battle to a surprise attack. We had lost twenty-five workers, fourteen foot soldiers, two cavalrymen, and three knights. Five carriages were seriously damaged, and four more were unusable due to broken wheels and axles. To top it all off, a young woman who claimed to be Justus de A Dyne's descendant had popped out of the carriage that should never have been opened. I would do the same in his position.

"I can only begin to imagine your position," I said. "Did Sir Tarutung say anything?"

"I heard him say that part of the job was to 'also' guard a VIP."

That was all the info Sir Lazne had, huh. This made things trickier.

"Did you receive any instructions on what to do in the event of an unexpected disaster?"

"No. Nothing. The baron said we needed to give our lives for this job."

If I hadn't been toughened up working under Lady Agrippina, I would've shouted "That useless asshole!" with enough force to blow away the whole damn tent. You couldn't expect a long-haul cargo

shipment to make the whole trek without at least a *hiccup* or two in this day and age. That blasted baron had saddled us with a high-value passenger and the only advice he had to give was "don't mess this up"? Was he joking?! If we returned alive, I'd wring his useless head from his neck.

"Sir Lazne, what should we do now?"

"As...an exemplary Imperial knight, I would say that we should continue the job, but..."

Sir Lazne's internal struggle was as clear as day to me. Even though he believed that we should finish this job, we didn't have the manpower for it. We were left with a scant fraction of the original caravan, and the road was still long. We had stopped off at a number of towns since leaving Marsheim, and we were about halfway on our journey to Altheim, but we had come to the stretch of the route without well-maintained roads or any large towns nearby. To top it off, the old town we had stayed in during the hailstorm and subsequent rain was pro-Imperial, but they weren't particularly friendly.

We had a big bomb in our hands and couldn't head onward.

"Should we turn back?" I said.

"No... With someone from the de A Dyne bloodline, it would be more dangerous to go there."

"Agreed. I hardly expect we would receive a warm welcome with her."

Although the town was under the Empire's remit on paper, the atmosphere was hardly *welcoming*. We came with our goods, but it was evident they looked at us wondering what the hell we were doing there. If they found out about that girl's history, we could turn the whole town against us.

"Luckily the bridge remained undamaged. Once we have collected the goods from the destroyed carriages and lain the dead to rest, we should head back to Marsheim. It will be the long way around, but this situation is completely unexpected."

"A wise decision," I said. "I'll rally everyone and reorganize the caravan once more."

"Thank you. I'll leave that to you. I have something I need to

think about. Give me some time, please," Sir Lazne said, sitting down on his stool and curling up into a ball.

I was about to leave him when someone entered the tent.

"I would advise you to surrender. The weight of imprisoning me in that carriage is great, but if you allow me to go now then I promise I shall go easy on you."

"My lady, you can't enter without asking!"

The woman who called herself the last descendant of the de A Dyne line walked in free from her bindings—although just the restraints, as the rest of what she was wearing seemed to be locked by magical means—still quite open about her haughty attitude. Trailing in behind her was the old man who had also been in the carriage.

"You are Lady Ferlin! You cannot walk around without protection!"

"Manservant of mine, how can I stand around and not say what must be said when it must be said?"

Behind them both was Etan. His flustered appearance told me how well his handling of them was going. I'd told him to watch over them, but it seemed the task of forcibly restraining someone with noble blood had been a bit too much to ask.



“Surrender? We still have the energy to fight, and we aren’t the sort of fools to hand you over to the local lords. Excuse my impudence, but I would ask that you return to the safety of your carriage.”

I answered her coldly and looked over at Sir Lazne, seeking his permission to throw her back in the iron carriage with a look, to which he nodded his assent.

I had checked earlier, just in case, and it seemed like the other reinforced carriages were filled with food fit for a noble. In other words, they had the same structure, and so any of them would prove a fine place to hold her once more.

“You’ll regret this, little one. My faithful subordinates will come for me. I can’t guarantee how long that slender neck of yours will remain attached to your body.”

“Lady Ferlin, please watch your words! You are from a noble bloodline, so please act with a little more decorum!”

This Ferlin was acting exceptionally high and mighty, but I supposed it made sense if she was playing the part of the descendant of a high king.

“I’m sorry, but we do not have the authority to engage in negotiations. Please, return to your carriage.”

I placed a hand upon my sword, wordlessly indicating that she should listen to me while I was still being kind. Ferlin acquiesced with a look of great displeasure.

“I’ve remembered your face, little one,” she said. “Your hair will look good hung around the end of a spear.”

“Please, my lady! Try to understand your position. Now, follow me.”

Ferlin’s old manservant took her away as her eyes blazed with a fierce self-regard. I supposed that she had regained some confidence in seeing her allies come to save her despite the chaos that had unfurled. All the same, she really could flap her gums, despite being held captive. And then she had the gall to say she’d hang me by my hair? *Just try it, girlie...*

“Boss, do you believe her?” Etan said.

“Believe what?”

"That she's descended from a high king..."

Etan seemed worried, but I shook my head confidently.

"The de A Dyne family were all killed by the Empire. She's just some girl whose handlers have groomed her into their next figurehead. Don't you worry, okay?"

The truth was I was just saying this to allay Etan's fears—I wasn't so sure myself. The local lords' realm spread farther than it seemed. War with the Empire would have led them to squirrel their children away. Even if the Empire had tried to root them out, it was a near impossible task to find them all; I couldn't say for sure either way if she was descended from Justus.

If she were, though, then why send her the long way round from Marsheim to Altheim? Had the Empire intended to show off their precious bargaining chip to some third party to placate them in some capacity? It was possible. They could, for example, marry her off to Margrave Marsheim's heir to throw a bone to the strongmen by putting someone from a high king's bloodline in a cushy, high-profile, but ultimately decorative role. But would they really cook up such a scheme?

Until now, the Empire had assumed an antagonistic approach, engineering plausibly deniable schemes to weed out their most powerful opponents in small skirmishes. It seemed unlikely that they would suddenly switch to such a bloodless strategy. The Empire wasn't a monolith, though. Considering that Marquis Donnersmarck was working behind the scenes, maybe parties who wouldn't benefit from the economic fallout of war had been making their moves.

The rain was still pouring down; I was watching everyone carry the wounded to carriages and gather what supplies they could when Margit, who had been on a scouting mission about thirty minutes past the bridge, came back.

"Erich..."

"Margit! You're safe."

"I am. My apologies. I was there, and yet I couldn't see the ambush coming."

She seemed downcast, which made sense considering her sense of responsibility. Any scout would have their senses dulled in this

deluge. I couldn't blame her.

"More importantly, I have something to show you," she said.

"A head? Someone important?"

I took the head in my hands, but I didn't recognize the face. It was a middle-aged mensch with a beard styled in the fashion of the local lords. He was silent in my hands, but he felt strangely cold.

Wait a second...

"This head's too well-preserved," I said.

"It is," Margit replied. "A person's head doesn't look like this thirty minutes after being cut off."

On closer inspection, despite its lack of any funereal gussying up, the head's skin still retained a healthy glow. People decayed quickly. After five minutes, the blood loss and congestion would cause the skin to change color. In thirty minutes it would begin to darken like a bruise. This head looked freshly cut.

"Mud...?"

To top it off, I could see flecks of mud in his beard and hair. The mud was even on his scalp—this wasn't something that would happen just from falling over.

"What's going on?" I said.

"I gave a closer look and his armor was coated in mud—but not like he'd just been running about in the rain. He wouldn't have gotten muddy like that unless he had been buried."

The mines, the grenade launcher, and now this creepy body.

I had a bad feeling.

From what I could tell, this head—from which I could only smell the stench of blood—had belonged to someone who'd received some kind of magical enhancement and had waited under the earth to launch a sneak attack. That or he had been transformed into *something* that wouldn't feel pain despite being buried.

"This is not good," I said.

"I'm sorry to bring more bad news, but we're surrounded."

"What?"

I looked around in disbelief, but could only see sheets of rain. Margit pointed out a few spots around our perimeter—each a group of five or so, each watching us.

"Can you take care of them?" I said.

"I tried before I made my way back to you, but they're tricky to pick up on in the first place and they twigged to my pursuit and bailed faster than I could compensate for. They're either well trained or they're using some sort of dastardly trick," my partner said with a shrug.

I scratched my head.

Damn it all... I already had a lot on my plate, and now this?

It seemed like we'd pulled the short straw yet again.

[Tips] Bureaucrats and adventurers alike follow the maxim of knowing only what they need to know. However, when the one in possession of all the information dies, troubles inevitably arise.

Three days later, I received a despairing report from Sir Lazne.

"We've run out of water," he said.

"Already?" I replied.

Our most valuable resource had run dry.

Even with the casualties we'd suffered, we were still a large caravan; we needed a lot of water. What impacted our water usage the most were our packhorses and warhorses, each far thirstier than any one person. While all of the water we had rationed—made from drinking water and alcohol to stop it from going bad—would take your average person days to finish, we were on the march, and that had meant we had gone through our supply in no time at all.

"We should have had more leeway, but the carriages we lost had carried much of our reserves," Sir Lazne said.

"I see... This isn't ideal at all."

At the moment, our caravan was on the way back to Marsheim. We had chosen open roads to avoid being surrounded, but that meant that our route (which already wasn't the shortest way) had gotten even longer. It went without saying that we hadn't stopped off at any of the roadhouses we had planned to—who knew which one had an ambush lying in wait for us?—and had taken roads that gave the settlements a wide berth. It had never been in doubt that

our supplies would run out before we made it home; it was only unclear which would give out first and how soon.

"If we economize, we might last three days, but..." he said.

"Our wounded will die. As will many horses."

"Exactly. It would be foolish to tire our own people out when we're on a quick march. We need to restock, but where?"

In our makeshift commander's tent, which was just one of our carriages, Sir Lazne had a map of the area laid out. There were no rivers or lakes in the area, so our only option was to make for a canton with a well. Mika could use his magic to create some water in a pinch, but he didn't have nearly enough mana to keep more than a hundred people topped up. Realistically, finding a new supply was our only option.

"The nearest cantons are here, here, and here."

The three cantons that Sir Lazne pointed out were ones I had never heard of, but by that same token, I'd never heard any rumors that they were affiliated with the local lords. We still had a long road ahead, so stopping would be ideal. In the worst case, we would see whether our gold would prove sufficient sealant for the locals' loose lips.

"The closest would be this one," Sir Lazne went on. "We're still being followed, correct?"

"Yes."

Margit had attempted to get rid of the people tailing us, but they would flee whenever she got close. However, as soon as she let off, they would come back. It had been impossible to shake them. I'd made an effort to keep my surprise at the notion that my partner could be outdone like this battened down, partially for her sake and partially because it kept me open to contemplate a theory I'd had rattling around in my skull since she'd shown me the head she'd taken. I didn't have solid proof, but I was pretty much certain I was on the money.

"It's likely that the nearest canton will have an ambush waiting for us," Sir Lazne said. "I was thinking at this point we might as well pick our next destination with a dice roll."

"I'll send our scouts ahead, so please don't do anything rash."

My personal concerns aside, we'd been forced to reckon with demands from every angle of late. It seemed like Sir Lazne wasn't used to all of this responsibility—hence all the doomsaying and histrionics from him lately. I was struggling to keep his head in the game. At this point our whole job was to make it home alive. I wanted him to save the nihilistic remarks until we were actually at the precipice of death.

"Let's go via this meandering route," I said. "That way, we'll be within a walkable distance of the canton and our scouts can check for trouble."

"Right, yes... I'll leave the arrangements to you."

Sir Lazne had pretty much given up on assuming any kind of leadership position; he wasn't so much *delegating* as pitching responsibility for everything my way. I kept my complaints to myself and bowed before leaving to complete my tasks.

When I stepped out of the carriage, a fine rain was still falling. Devout followers of the Harvest Goddess liked to argue whether this sort of thing was Her tears of sadness or the God of Wind and Clouds's tears after being beaten up by His wife. I almost started to miss Berylin; back there, I used to overhear that sort of debate on the daily. What went without question was that this rain was bad for us. It hadn't let up once, and it had only become an increasing pain in our collective ass.

We had forsaken the plan of drinking the rain since the idea came up. It would take far too long to boil enough of it for the lot of us and we didn't have enough mana to do that magically either. Most importantly, we didn't have the time to wait for the barrels to fill up. Without a rain collection tool, our only option was just to leave the barrels completely open like a bunch of dumbasses. Squeezing the rain from our sodden clothes would've been more efficient.

"Boss?"

"Hey, Mathieu. What's up?"

As I put my rain cloak back over me with a sigh, Mathieu came over. The oils in his werewolf coat had finally lost out to the rain, and now his proud fur looked wet and sad.

"Another newbie collapsed," he said. "Caught a cold, I think."

"That's not good. What's Kaya's estimation?"

"She said her medicine stocks will run out soon."

"All right. For the folk whose symptoms aren't too bad yet, keep 'em warm and try and help them get over it."

The relentless rain was sapping our body heat, and about a fifth of us—Fellows, knights' retinue, and laborers alike—were feeling under the weather. Wet clothes made you cold and marching while exhausted weakened the immune system. Of course, we couldn't stay put either; it was our second largest problem after the mud.

It was impossible to even set up a campfire to warm us up in this constant rain. We hadn't set up camp under the trees for fear of an ambush, meaning that we were left with no dry spot to light a fire. If we had a woodfire, things would be different, but spring was over and summer was on its way, so we hadn't brought the necessary supplies. All we could do was change into dry clothes and stay safe inside the carriages which still had waterproof tents over them.

Thanks to Kaya we hadn't suffered any deaths, but the other symptoms that a cold could bring on could prove fatal in this era. I wasn't sure what would happen if we kept slogging through it, so I really hoped we could spend one or two nights under a dry roof.

"Are you okay, Boss?" Mathieu asked.

"I'm a former farmer. Being sturdy is all I'm good for!"

Thanks to a number of health-related traits, I was pretty hardy. With Sir Lazne utterly despondent, I had essentially taken up leadership of the caravan. Everyone else was cooped up inside, but I needed to proudly stay out here to lead us onward.

"We'll depart when everyone's eaten what they can. Relay the message to everyone."

We were struggling even to get a small fire to cook with—fortunately Mika could create a fire that wouldn't go out, even in the rain—so we needed to get meal times over with quickly and get somewhere decent to rest up. Otherwise we might lose a few more comrades. It would be the Fellowship's greatest shame—how could we show our faces to the families of the deceased if we told them they had died not from a battle at the end of the adventure, but from a cold?

As everyone finished getting ready, our caravan—a lot smaller than it had been when we had first set off—started to depart. I made sure Margit was scouting ahead and our other scouts weren't too far away. We needed to stay at high alert.

After about a half day of wandering, we finally reached the nearest canton on the map. Margit reported that from what she could see they didn't have any soldiers in hiding, and they weren't acting suspiciously either. We decided that it was safe enough to make a move; when we arrived, the village head came and welcomed us in.

"Erich, first make sure we get some water and some butter," Siegfried whispered in my ear when we had gone inside the village head's house and they made preparations to greet us.

"Why's that?" I said.

"Old local custom. If you're welcomed with clean water and butter, then that's a promise that they'll give you safe lodgings to spend the night. Break it and everyone will treat you like the scum of the earth."

"Aha, so that's what they do out here in the west."

Back in Konigstuhl, the village chief would present a cup and take a sip before handing it to the head of the visiting party to show that we had no ill will. I supposed similar customs could be found anywhere. I passed the info along to Sir Lazne, and he made the request without much complaint.

This was where things started to head south.

"Stop, people!"

Sir Lazne flung his cup down. The emerald ring on his right hand was glowing. Emeralds could be easily imbued with spells that could detect poisons, and were often used by nobles to stay safe. The glow coming from his middle finger indicated that the water was poisoned.

"Explain yourself, you knave! I told you we would pay!" Sir Lazne roared at the village head. He grabbed the thin old man by his lapel. Sir Lazne's men put their hands on their weapons, and the canton folk nearest to their head grabbed anything fit to stab or bludgeon with.

Crap, this is bad. This is very, very bad.

"O-Our high king will return! We were told that the high king will return! You Imperial pawns will be—"

"You backstabbing scum!"

Sir Lazne flew into a rage and thrust his dagger into the village head's stomach.

All hell broke loose.

We were armed professionals; the canton's residents were simple farmers. It wasn't much of a fight—more a one-sided slaughter. They were dead before you could close your eyes and count to fifty.

"No, no, no... What are we going to do?" I muttered, unable to stop the words from coming out.

It would've cast shame upon my sword to use it to slay village folk, so I tried to knock them out with my fists and boots, but Sir Lazne and his men were merciless. The village head's house was a bloody mess before long. Outside, I could hear my allies fighting with the residents who had come to see what the fuss was about, and the inn, too, became soiled with their blood.

"Kill them all! Everyone in this canton must die!" Sir Lazne shouted.

"Sir Lazne, please, show some mercy!" I said. "It would shame your blade to cut down anyone who didn't have a hand in this, let alone the women and the children!"

"The *representative* of this canton tried to kill us in cold blood! We need to destroy them, root and branch!"

I tried to stop Sir Lazne, but the blood had gone to his head. He wouldn't be calmed until everyone was dead. His men looked ready to cut down all who dared to stand in their way. Siegfried, too, who had also come along, looked furious—I supposed that was how important this oath was. As the sounds of violence from outside made it into the room, I realized in a moment I wouldn't be able to stop this.

"Let go of me, Goldilocks!"

"Please—spare those who won't attack! Spare the women and children!"

"Out of my way! If that'll help you sleep at night, then you can do

it! Everyone else, follow me!”

Why was this happening?! I followed Sir Lazne out of the village head’s manor and watched as he furiously cut down everyone in his way.

With the place we’d meant to lay our heads soaked in gore and the angered stares of the survivors boring into the backs of our heads, I realized something—we’d receive no help from any canton out here.

[Tips] An old custom in Ende Erde is to offer visitors water and butter. This is an implicit oath that you will provide them with safety. Breaking this oath is akin to stabbing someone in the back. So barbaric is the act that few will feel any qualms over killing you where you stand, and even honoring the dead body will be considered more than you deserve.

Despite our first roaring fire and roof over our heads in days, I didn’t feel any calmer.

In the end we killed half of the men in the canton, as well as a number of their vengeful wives. We threw the bodies into the village head’s manor and claimed their houses as our own for the night. As for the survivors, we forced them into the storehouse and barn and warned them that we would cut them down if they came within fifty paces of the houses. I felt lower than dirt.

I knew that they had tried to poison all of us. Part of me feared I was being too sentimental; that it was naive of me to feel that I’d befouled my blade and my sword by killing those who’d chosen neither banditry nor the warrior’s life.

“Hey, Erich,” Siegfried said. “I made sure that local lord’s girl, Ferlin or whatever her name was, was placed somewhere suitable.”

“Thanks,” I said. “How’s she doing?”

“Satisfied that we’re treating her with some decency, but royally pissed at you and the knights who ordered her people to be slaughtered.”

“Well, let her be pissed... Damn it all...”

As I let my mask of composure slip for the first time in a while—I was ready to spit if I wasn't inside—Siegfried cocked his head. Even if he felt it was right to be annoyed at the backstabbing canton folk, he seemed to think it strange how constantly cold I'd been to the supposed last descendant of the de A Dyne line.

"You're never this rude to women," Sieg said. "Did you lose a family member in the western incursion or something?"

"No. I just don't like these damn local lords. They tried to ambush us even all the way out here! It's just not normal!" I smacked my leg with all my might, unable to hold the anger in. "A king *leads their people*. Who makes their own subjects fight to the death just to scrabble back to their throne?! Is this some kind of sick joke?!"

"Hey, hey, calm down, man... It's not as if Ferlin ordered them to do all this."

"That may be, but I'm still pissed. Maybe *you lot* are being way too kind."

I'd told my Fellows to treat her with care, but they were being far too soft on this de Ledea Dyne. She was young and pretty, but surely that wasn't enough to put the whole situation on its ear like this?

"She was a princess in a different time. Guys are weak to positions like that. Especially when she's been locked away."

"The poor, beautiful princess tied up in an iron carriage... Tch. Softies, the lot of them..."

I did get where they were coming from, but the local lords were already the lowest of the low in my mind. There was no way I could harbor positive feelings for their potential figurehead. If Sir Tarutung hadn't given his damn order to protect her, I might've cut her down myself by now.

What would we do if the local lords got too big for their breeches? We put our lives on the line to bring peace after Kykeon; were we really ready to give that up again?

Where the hell did the Empire squirrel her out from, huh?

Despite our first moment of peace in a while, not even a puff on my pipe could bring my anger back under control. I couldn't show this side of me to those under me. I was happy Sieg was here; I

needed to air my grievances to *someone*.

"This job's just puzzle after puzzle," I said.

"Yeah, the whole delivery thing was a cover-up. They wanted to do something with Ferlin."

"Exactly. Don't you think it's just...unnatural?"

Not being quite as clued in regarding politics as I, my comrade gave me a very confused look, so I decided to explain things while also getting my thoughts in order.

"All right, first up, if Ferlin is a political playing piece, then there's no reason to send her out on the road. If the government truly did capture the last descendant of the de A Dyne lineage, then it would be safer and quicker to have just made a show of her in Marsheim."

"But a lotta people wouldn't believe she's the real deal."

"Even if so, there's no reason for all this secrecy. They should parade her around with the biggest, baddest caravan they have so that no local lord could even lay a finger on her."

Our caravan had been big enough to dissuade bandits or small-time local lords from attacking, but we were a small fighting force of fewer than two hundred. When we were attacked, things had descended into disorder—we were evidently not large enough to keep her safe. If Margrave Marsheim was leading the charge, he could easily scrounge up an army of at least a thousand. I had to assume there was a reason he hadn't.

"Hmm, yeah, when you put it like that, it is unnatural," Siegfried said. "There's gotta be a reason they're keeping this job so hush-hush, no?"

"But not to rally them into perfidy, that's for sure."

"Force them to do what now?"

"Treason."

The local lords mostly put on a face of allegiance but fully intended to betray the Empire when the right moment presented itself. They hadn't actually sworn their allegiance. If the Empire wanted to use this person under the de A Dyne lineage as a means of leveraging peace, then there was no reason for the smoke and mirrors with the secret missives. I couldn't see why anyone would take the risk of having her out here with us on the road.

She could easily have been used to turn the tides in the local lords' favor if they got hold of her. Would they really leave her be if they saw her in their territory? If they wanted to show her off, then they would do it under the aegis of Marsheim Castle, and if they needed her moved under wraps, then why not at least do so in safely guarded Imperial territory? It made no sense dragging her around the sticks!

"But if some bigwig wanted to meet her but didn't wanna budge from their own territory, then they might resort to some drastic measures, I guess?" Siegfried said.

"Yeah, but remember she was bound up. That was excessive for a young woman, not to mention the height of rudeness. If she was shown off looking like that, most local lords would flip their lid."

"You got a point... Even I felt bad for her like that."

Ferlin's bindings and that huge eye patch were bugging me. It was just overkill if it was meant to stop her from running. If she was merely as she appeared, then they could just keep her behind bars. She couldn't run far on those thin legs, and her attitude showed that she was used to being taken care of like a noble. It was stupid to be worried that she could run to a local lord's domain on her own through the wilderness.

The eye patch reeked of mana. I didn't have much history with them, but I knew that it had been imbued with the sort of School of Polar Night enchantment people used to keep high-energy magic contained—the sort of thing you usually saw in labs and libraries and such, not *people*.

"Wait, hold on... Justus de A Dyne possessed a magical eye, didn't he?" I said.

"Yeah, people called him the Ash-Eyed King. Stories say that whoever he stared at would stop moving."

Eyes were a hugely important organ in a magical sense, and also were the place where bodily quirks often manifested. Your eyes, after all, were a rare body part which could simultaneously input *and* output information. After all, they were vehicles for *expression* as much as sense organs. Because of that, if someone from a race without an innate catalyst was born with a magical mutation that

granted them one, then it usually manifested in the eye.

They were spoken of with some disgust as "witch eyes." As for Justus, the stories went that his particular witch eye was an Eye of the Conqueror, allowing him to force anyone within his vision to obey his command.

"Then doesn't that make her story seem more legit?" Siegfried said. "That stuff's genetic, right?"

"Well, the possibility is there," I said.

If her eye patch wasn't to hide a wound but to keep a legitimate witch eye under control, then... Oh, hell, this was just even more confusing. There were just more mysteries and no answers. What could I do?

I puffed away on my pipe to rid myself of that stewing frustration when suddenly a whistle signal from afar cut through the air. I readied myself, wondering what was going on, when a shock wave ran through me. I opened the window and saw that the barn we'd forced the villagers inside of was on fire, and that our carriages in the square had been bowled over.

"Those bastards!" Siegfried spat.

"Move out! Keep your guards up!" I yelled.

They'd set the barn on fire and they'd used that blasted grenade launcher again! What were the lookouts doing?!

I hurried out to the square and took in the miserable sight of one third of our carriages in ruins. It looked like they had fired off multiple shots; the steel carriage was in pieces and my Fellows who had been guarding it were groaning from the shrapnel.

"Battle formations, people! Add more fuel to the watch fires!"

I gave the order to some Fellows who had come out into the chaos, as it was too dark to see anyone.

"We can't, Boss! They won't last in this rain!"

"Get some people together and put out that fire!" I said.

"It's blazing too hot! We can't get close!"

"Dammit! They must've mixed in something with the fuel!"

The fire had covered the barn in moments and was impossible to stop. If this rain couldn't do anything, then they'd either used magically enhanced fuel or it was powered by magic itself.

"Erich, I'll go help!"

"Stop, Mika! It's a trap! Head out there and they'll shoot you dead!"

"But...!"

Mika had rushed outside too, unable to bear simply watching. I left the square to Siegfried and headed off with him to the barn. This canton might have tried to poison us, but Mika couldn't simply watch people die. *I understand how you feel, but you're too reckless, old chum...*

As expected, as soon as we neared the fire, arrows rained down on us. Using what few light sources we had, I struck them down before they hit us. Mika pressed his staff into the earth and drew out mud, using it to engulf the house like a dragon consuming its prey. He was a smart guy, that was for sure. This mud was wet and wouldn't catch alight, and before long it would starve the fire of oxygen. Having successfully stopped the blaze, Mika created an exit route and rushed to help those inside evacuate but...no one came out.

"The fire was too strong. It suffocated them," I said.

I covered my mouth and looked inside to see a pile of unburned bodies. Before the fire had got to them, it had created toxic levels of carbon monoxide.

"I failed them..."

"It's not your fault, Mika," I said. "It's the bastards who attacked them."

I tightened my grip on my sword. My words were meant to convince myself as much as anyone else.

Calm down; the enemy's doing this to ruin your morale! They want you to think that these people died because you came. It's a cowardly attack on your emotions. Don't let them have their way. Turn that anger on the enemy.

I felt a presence behind me—I could tell that my partner wasn't here to play our usual game.

"Erich!"

"Margit!"

Margit looked worried as she dashed off and I followed behind.

She led me to a heap of bound captives. I was impressed that she'd managed this in all the chaos.

"Incredible, Margit," I said. "Now to question—"

"No, Erich," she said. "Look."

I dragged the captives to the watch fires under the eaves and my breath stopped in my throat. A strange sound escaped me, and my heart felt tight as I fully processed the gruesome sight. The captives each had a flat piece of metal embedded into their foreheads. It looked almost like a horn and was engraved with a number of complex formulae. Just at a glance I could tell that each one was rooted deep in the brain.

These were the "tools" they had used to remain undetected. The enemy had used these...*meat puppets* against us. Living folk altered to move and act at the whim of some far-removed puppeteer, the enchantments of the graft handling all the complex automated routines necessary to maintain a faint semblance of bodily function. A vacant, lifeless body would never complain about long hours of grueling labor in the rain without food or water. It could dwell insensate, unnoticed, and unharmed beneath the earth, waiting for its moment to strike. What fiend would resort to methods like these, fouler than any practice seen in all hell's abattoirs and latrines rolled into one? What abyss had they plumbed to learn them?

"This is disgusting," I said. "How could you do this to another person? And this guy..."

"Looks like he's from Ende Erde, from his facial structure."

The Fellows with Margit all wore pained expressions. Some could bear the sight no longer and became swiftly and inadvertently reacquainted with their dinner.

"So...we have to fight these things?" I muttered.

My words, filled with a fear and disgust that I'd not felt before, disappeared into the rain. Even now it was falling, like the tears of these poor meat puppets.

[Tips] The now deceased high king Justus de A Dyne was known as the Ash-Eyed King. Justus was born with a mutation that turned his gray eye into a catalyst, allowing

him to naturally use powerful psychosorcery.

Justus's quirk of genetics did not resurface in his son. Songs are sung in secret that Justus's reign across Ende Erde could never have been without the power of his Conqueror's Eye.

Dawn broke after the attack, and the tear-like rain turned into a fine, misty drizzle.

We had remained on guard all night, and although we had been taking turns, it looked like no one had slept well. With deep rings under their eyes, my Fellows gathered in the yard, and under the dark clouds I assessed the damages.

In the chaos of last night, we had five injured—including one Fellow and one trial member—who were covered in wounds from the explosion, but thanks to Kaya's work they were in stable condition. Fortunately they had moved quickly enough to cover their eyes and mouths, and so it wouldn't be long until they were able to perform as before.

"We only have nine carriages that are still usable, huh," I said.

"A lot of the horses bolted, after all..." Dietrich replied, as she fluttered her ear.

As she said, our carriages were terribly damaged, and we had lost some packhorses that had gotten spooked during the explosions. They had bucked so violently that they had ripped away the ropes keeping them secure. Dietrich and our light cavalry unit had managed to bring some of them back, but nine carriages was our limit.

"I don't have any more parts for the axles, Erich. And the iron carriage is beyond saving," Mika said.

My chum's report was hardly good news either. We had used up all of our repair supplies, and we didn't have a carriage for our little princess. Talk about a pain... What was I going to do if my Fellows' bleeding hearts grew all the more tender as they spent more time face-to-face with her? As it was, she was already lowering our morale by shouting, "If you'd surrendered, this wouldn't have happened!" I gave serious thought to just *gagging* her.

“How are the damages, Erich?”

Just as I was finishing my checks, Sir Lazne and Ferlin—freshly bound and with her manservant in tow—came walking up to us. Yesterday we’d put her in a well-guarded house, so she wasn’t injured, but her manservant was hunched over and looked terrified. Ferlin cut an entirely opposite figure.

“As you can see, Sir Lazne, we have nine viable carriages. We have to use half for the injured, and even if we take our things on our backs, we’ll only be able to stock up on three days’ worth of supplies.”

It looked like he hadn’t slept well either. As I explained things to the exhausted Sir Lazne, he scratched at his head and muttered a curse. It appeared that he no longer had the wherewithal to care about how he appeared.

“Right...” he said. “We should be happy that no one died, but...”

“Yes, I understand.”

Our injured were our biggest load. We couldn’t leave them behind, but that meant they would take up space and victuals without actually being able to work. With fewer carriages to carry our provisions, the distance we could travel was greatly limited.

“I told you. If you’d just given up, none of this would have happened,” Ferlin said.

“M-My lady!” her manservant sputtered. “Please don’t use such harsh language. I beg you—have some understanding of your personage as Ferlin Sechstia de Ledea Dyne! Your life supersedes everything else!”

I felt my hand reach for my sword as she implied that we had invited this tragedy. I allowed my frustration to manifest as a tight fist and ignored her as I continued my report.

“We need food, water, and medicine, but that might be difficult,” I said.

“I expect we could make it to the next canton, but...”

“We’ll have to prepare for the worst if we see a repeat of what happened here.”

My stomach twisted with a bad premonition. Sir Lazne hunched over. He looked like he was trying to avoid throwing up.

"I cannot stand to see my beautiful home sullied any longer," Ferlin chimed in. "Surrender and I will consider listening to your appeals to spare your lives."

"My lady!"

"I am afraid that this conversation is going nowhere," I said to Ferlin. "We are still in high spirits. We have fewer supplies than anticipated; that is all. I would appreciate it if you would stop interrupting."

I tried not to cluck my tongue and ask why the hell Sir Lazne had brought them here.

This canton had many supplies, but we had to leave most of them behind; we didn't have the means to carry it all. Our injured would be safely carried, but I couldn't help but think of it as if we had been collectively punched square in the liver.

"We will deal with the situation when it arises," Sir Lazne said. "We will take all we possibly can. Horses too."

"We can't be picky, can we?"

"Don't think that I'll allow your slaughter to go unpunished!" Ferlin yelled.

"Lady Ferlin, please calm yourself!"

I suppressed the urge to gag her as we all set about finishing our preparations to leave. With stormy hearts under an equally stormy sky, we set off from the ruined canton with tottering steps. The day passed without much of note; night arrived.

I expected that we would be subject to another grenade attack in the night, so we dispersed to set up camp. We put the wounded in low-pitched tents and set to sleep out in the open. It was unpleasant to try and rest in the rain, but we didn't know what would happen. It was preferable to being blasted by a bomb in our sleep.

I'd fallen into a light sleep with Schutzwolfe in my arms when a bit of kerfuffle woke me up.

I dashed over to see what the situation was and saw that we had received arrow fire. A number of people had huddled together to keep warm, but this had made them a target, apparently. Fortunately they had used their shields to keep the rain off them, so no one was hurt. They had spent thirty minutes trying to find the

culprit, but the only thing they managed to do was turn up two meat puppets. Obviously we weren't going to get any intel out of them.

This was a nightmare. The enemy was exploiting their soldiers' tireless nature, steadily sapping at our morale and stamina while they remained just as effective as ever. I preferred it to getting bombed in my sleep, but I knew that odds were good the restless nights would cost us dearly soon. No one had collapsed from the fatigue yet, but it was a matter of time.

We toughed out another day cutting across a pathless expanse until another frightful dusk came. The weather stayed awful, and the churning storm clouds covered the moon and stars, turning the sky into an inky black sheet. It was so dark that I could barely see my hands in front of me.

Ferlin had said that her beautiful homeland looked exactly like it did in her memories. I honestly couldn't sympathize. Every day the land felt more and more like an open grave, vast enough to swallow us all for good.

We used blankets and coats to cover our few magical light sources and managed to cook up some dinner, but we were all wearier than ever. In particular, our scout team was being worn down by the perpetual faint impression of the enemy's presence. Even Margit was starting to look tired.

If we were in our usual unit size of five or six, we would have been able to shake them off, but our caravan was still too large.

I stuck a spear in the ground and placed a shield on top to create a little shelter from the rain and had got to smoking under it when I sensed a presence in the darkness. This wasn't Margit. She was out picking off a few more meat puppets.

"You seem dissipated."

"Miss Nakeisha? Why are you here?"

A familiar sepa spy emerged from the gloom. She tossed a number of heads—all bearing that telltale metal addition—my way, as well as a few grenade launchers.

"I came to assess the situation in the west on Marquis Donnersmarck's orders. I heard rumors about you and came to see how you were faring," Miss Nakeisha replied.

"I'm pleased as punch to hear that I'm not on my own."

"Unfortunately I do not come bearing good news. The enemy has supplied backup and more supplies. This was but a fraction," she said, pointing at her haul. It was hard for me to keep the emotion off my face.

This was, plainly, the worst possible news. Our hand was diminishing by the hour, and the enemy's strength only seemed to be mounting. I knew we were in their territory, but the ease with which they turned up the heat under us scared the living hell out of me.

"I eliminated what I could, but it appears your foe has *generous* backers. Please assume that each group will have one of these weapons."

"That beats *not* knowing, but it bitters the pipe."

I scowled as if the citrus mix designed to calm my nerves had turned to mud in my throat.

"We will do our best to aid you, but we have our own job to do. Please do not count on us," Miss Nakeisha said.

"This intel is more than enough. There's nothing scarier than stumbling about in the dark."

It boosted my morale to hear that we weren't completely alone. It felt as if a little warmth had returned to my rain-soaked body.

"I shall leave you now. I pray for your success in battle."

"And you too," I said as I watched Miss Nakeisha slip back into the darkness.

I needed to switch up our tactics. At this rate, if we kept on toddling along with the injured, then we'd be wiped out by a volley of grenades sooner or later. We needed to take some time to recover.

I realized something just then. Their grenade attacks had seemed pretty random, and they didn't seem like they were holding back in the slightest. The local lords would want Ferlin—alive, at that. Yet her iron carriage had been trashed and every time they'd mounted an assault they'd gone all out. What was going on?

"Ugh, gimme a break..." I said with a sigh.

I scratched at my head, trying to get rid of the itch I felt from the

ever deepening mystery.

[Tips] The people that Erich and his group call "meat puppets" are modified people whose frontal lobes have been comprehensively enchanted. The fact that they do not eat or drink renders their body odor extremely faint. As they do not possess egos and mindlessly follow orders, their presences are also faint.

They lack the will or self-awareness to preserve their well-being, causing their bodies to slowly but surely break down; their greatly reduced metabolisms curb some of the wear and tear, but folk altered in such a way have a very short shelf life, so to speak. Or such is Erich's estimation.

"Good gods... They didn't have to go this far..." I muttered.

When the next canton finally came into view, I felt the strength leave my legs.

What we found was a charnel house turned inside out. The residents of the canton had been slaughtered, their corpses strewn wherever there was room for them. The village head and his wife had been strung up on the tree outside of his house; placards hung around their necks that read "I sold out my country" in the old language of Ende Erde. It had been a while since they'd been murdered; their corpses were decayed and picked at by the crows.

"Erich... The well's been poisoned."

"And the storehouses have been ransacked. Looks like the basements of the houses are untouched, though."

Kaya and Siegfried had done a bit of reconnaissance around the canton and had come back with a difficult-to-swallow report.

Could we catch even a *little* break?

This canton must have been pro-Imperial, or had at least received capital from the Empire. They'd been made an example, and in the same stroke deprived us of any means of recouping our losses. I wondered if most of the bodies were the elderly and children because the men and women had been used to craft those horrible meat puppets. Just how low would they sink before they

were satisfied?

"What supplies can we use?" I said.

"The residents' supplies seem to have been left behind," Kaya replied. "We should all be able to eat, at least. The well might be poisoned, but I should be able to purify it, so we won't struggle for water."

"Mika's surveyed the buildings; there are a few in good enough shape to bunk down in," Siegfried added.

I fell into thought.

It was no longer a realistic prospect to keep on stopping by cantons to resupply as we made our way home. Choosing this longer route hadn't been safer; instead we were faced with the prospect of more enemies and increasing exhaustion from camping outdoors. It seemed like our best shot at survival now hinged on making a big gamble.

"Sir Lazne, I'd like to make a report," I said.

"Yes, Mister Erich?"

Sir Lazne had been worn down by these past few days. His cheeks looked gaunt, and he plainly had given up on washing his face for a while now. His beard had turned scraggly and foul. I felt my own heart sink to see his fatigue put on such public display.

"I would like to suggest that we remain here for a while and build a fort," I said.

"Are you mad?! You only do that when you know help is coming! Who would come all the way out here to save us?"

It was as he said. Choosing to hole yourself up within a fort was a way to delay the inevitable while you waited for reinforcements to arrive. It was a game of attrition where the attackers could supply as much as they wished, while the defenders had a finite amount of time they could hold out.

However, our situation was a little different.

"Our enemy is made up of a small force. They are poking and prodding at us to annoy us and destroy our morale. What that means is that they have fewer forces to attack us with after losing a great number in our previous clash."

"But this is enemy territory. The local lords can easily replenish

their number.”

“Yes, but I don’t think they can prepare enough of a force to take us all down in a single night.”

“That might be true, but what point is there to clam up in a canton in the middle of flat land?!”

I could understand his frustration, but I wished he would let me finish.

“Listen to me, Sir Lazne,” I said. “Our injured are slowing us down. If they can rest in safe conditions for ten days, no, for a mere week, then I believe they will be strong enough to march at full speed once more. Our healer can testify to that.”

The wounded left over from the first assault and the folks who’d gotten sick from all those nights in the rain without any decent sleep were our foremost impediment. With them resting in the carriages, we had significantly less space for supplies, and we were marching at a slower trot so that the journey wouldn’t trouble them too much.

But if we could recover our strength, we would be able to set off once more at our full speed.

According to Kaya’s estimates, it would take three days for them to get better and another three days until everyone was able to function like before. All we then had to do was fill our carriages—now significantly unburdened—with all the supplies we could scrounge, and our odds of smashing through the enemy and securing the win we needed would improve tremendously.

“Once we’ve broken through, there’s a town a five-day march from here. We can make a break for it,” I went on. “It’s neutral and too big for the enemy to just rub it out.”

“And once there we can call for help, you think?”

“Exactly.”

Sir Lazne fell silent for a moment as he pondered the proposition. He asked for a little time to think it over. I decided to prepare for his eventual acceptance of the plan and started giving orders.

“Margit, select our lookout,” I said. “We can borrow the five houses around the village head’s manor. Seal all the windows and make sure not even a glimmer of light escapes.”

“Of course. I will make sure the enemy never draws a hair closer.”

"Etan! Gather everyone fit to work and set about making some trenches."

"You want us to dig?" the audhumbla replied.

"So long as the enemy still has their explosives, it's far too dangerous to gather indoors. We'd be sitting ducks. We need measures that will allow us to sleep safely while also keeping the enemy out."

"All right, Boss. I'll round up who I can and get right to it."

"Mika will give you instructions—he's a pro."

The village head's house was surrounded by a ring of five houses—probably once important members of the community—to form a natural plaza. The regular citizens' homes were about one or two hundred paces farther out. If we dug trenches in the gaps between the houses and fortified ourselves inside, not only would it be difficult for the enemy to get in, but we would also be able to keep a steady lookout and survive for a solid week. We could grab what supplies we needed in the meantime while everyone rested until they were fighting fit once more.

"Why go to all these efforts?"

As I was giving my orders, I felt a cold stare on my back as someone spoke. I turned and saw Ferlin dressed in a rain cloak alongside her manservant and a number of bodyguards.

"Why? To save ourselves," I said.

"That is not what I'm referring to. Look at this canton! They were laid to waste because you fools continued with your pointless struggle. If you had simply handed me over, you could have avoided this tragedy."

I felt like I heard a sound in my head just then. It sounded like something snapping. I imagined it was the strings keeping my patience in check.

"Do you really insist on insinuating that *we* killed these people?!"

With every ounce of ferocity and bloodlust I could muster, my words seemed to rip through the air itself. Even if she had only implied it, I couldn't let it stand.

"Th-This place was ransacked to slow you down! Which is why—"

"You think we might as well have killed them all? Cut the bullshit!

The filthy murderers who slaughtered this canton were *your* people! The ones trying to get you back! Not us!”

I pointed at the pile of corpses as I roared loud enough for every Fellow to hear. This was the one thing I didn’t want anyone to misunderstand.

“You chide us, but what about your people? They could have done anything else! They could have asked us to surrender, they could have met us head-on with enough forces to crush us! They could have spared these poor people and simply told them not to comply! Don’t you dare imply that we are bandits or criminals!”

“B-But—”

“Don’t you dare misunderstand me. I want to make it crystal clear that the ones hounding us for you are responsible for choosing violence. At every turn, we’ve chosen not to resort to inhumane measures; we’ve made every effort to shake the enemy off rather than force a confrontation that would jeopardize innocents. *Your* people massacred this canton! Save your cheap and blinkered moralizing for someone foolish enough to *care*!”

Ugh, this was depressing. I’d merely wanted to air out my grievances, but my anger wasn’t letting up. It was a waste of time to shout at someone who wouldn’t even begin to understand what I was trying to say.

“Remember this—what has been done here is *feeble* work, *cowards’* work! Such vile methods are below us. Don’t you *dare* look down on a Fellow of the Blade!”

The last bit might have been overkill, but I couldn’t stop it at this point.

“I... I...” Ferlin sputtered.

“My lady, please calm yourself!” the manservant said. “You are Lady Ferlin! Please, you must remain proud and maintain your dignity!”

Ferlin’s manservant was in a poor state too. Was it just my imagination or was he in a far more emaciated state than his lady? At any rate, I didn’t have time to waste on them anymore. I shut my mouth and told her bodyguards to throw the two of them into the village head’s manor before I returned to overseeing everyone.

"That wasn't like you, man," Siegfried said.

"What wasn't, Siegfried?" I said.

"Spitting nails and hellfire at the princess like that. Can't hold it against her for not knowing anything about anything, the way she's been brought up."

Even you say this to me, Siegfried?

"Can you blame me for losing my cool at being told all of this is *my fault*?" I said with a sigh as I made a sweeping gesture at the desolate canton.

This wasn't on us. The enemy decided it was more effective to do this, that they had no other option. I wouldn't let her disparage the Fellows or the knights and their retinues by suggesting we had any hand in that decision.

Yes, she'd misunderstood the situation; yes, it was no surprise that such a spoiled brat would lay blame wherever was closest to hand. I knew that she wasn't a fighter like us, but still—a *noble* should have known better. What did the local lords hope to achieve by hoisting her up as their figurehead?

"I'll be honest with you, Siegfried," I said. "I don't think very highly of that girl."

"Straight to the point there."

"Her remarks earlier made me dislike her. She has no self-awareness. She needs to make peace with the fact that as a noble, people will die for her."

That was the root of my anger. What defined a noble, in my eyes, was whether they had the mental fortitude to realize that they weren't like the common people. The nature of the role was that the lives of others hinged on everything you did, and so you had to learn to bear anything for their sake: a joyless marriage, a brutal workload—hell, risk to life and limb on the front lines if need be. If you could accept that burden and carry it well, then you could begin to earn your nobility.

Ferlin had lost any chance of being anyone's high king in earnest when she chose to lay blame where it was *easy*, rather than where it belonged. Such comfortable delusions were wholly unfit for true royalty.

"What I hate most after cowards and underhanded people are folk with no notion of how much they owe, and to whom," I went on.

"You're not mincing your words there either."

"What now, comrade? Have you been overcome by feelings for her too?"

"Don't even joke. I know some folk would fall for the whole kidnapped princess thing, but I ain't a fan of someone who knows so little of the world."

"Hm... Then I'll feel safer with you guarding her."

"You *what*?!"

To be honest, the atmosphere around her wasn't good. Some people had gotten sympathetic for her situation, and I'd even heard Ferlin telling one of the knights that she would spare his life if he took her to her people. While we were staying here, I wanted her to be looked after by someone I trusted.

"Are you really askin' me to be her bodyguard?" Sieg said.

"I'm not asking you to stick by her side all day long. I just want you to watch over things and make sure no one's acting rashly."

"Tch, dammit... I get the short straw again, huh..."

I patted Sieg encouragingly on the shoulder, but he batted my hand away. I was relieved—I knew that my comrade would do this job properly.

[Tips] Nobles are noble because they are aware that, at the end of the day, they are the ones who bear ultimate responsibility.

There had been seven explosions last night.

I was in the village head's manor—which we'd repurposed into a command center—and Ferlin's manservant's yelps made for a good warning signal.

All the explosions had been at the fringes of the canton in houses that we had lit up to make them seem inhabited. We had been sleeping in the area around the manor—Mika's fortified earthen wall kept us safe during the first volley—and as such were fine on a

physical front, but for some of our people being woken up multiple times in the night by explosions wasn't ideal for their mental health.

What a haphazard assault. Did they not think that their princess was inside one of those buildings?

Surveying the damage the next morning, I walked around the buildings to see a beautifully dug line of trenches. Standing inside, they reached about chest-high. Then in order to prevent anyone from leaping over, a tough-looking wire entanglement had been placed all around. This was Mika's work—he had made use of his studies at the College learning about combat architecture.

To top it off, a number of pegs were dotted around, which Margit had tied off with her spiderweb. Connected to an alarm bell, this makeshift warning system would alert us of any incoming danger.

Despite how advanced the enemy's grenades looked, it seemed like they had a short range. With this much distance between us and the enemy, we'd be fine. Being uncertain of where we would be hit next was a bit scary, but it was better than being in a carriage and knowing you would be blasted.

"Boss, I've just finished with morning roll call. Everyone's in fine health," Karsten said.

"Thanks. Good job."

Karsten was on duty today—we had separated morning and evening duties—and had just given me the report. Our people looked exhausted from the explosions last night, most likely having not slept, but we needed to keep at it. I was the same—I'd stayed up last night just in case.

I went to deliver the all-clear report to Sir Lazne at the manor, but I found him in the middle of the living space with his head in his hands. When I asked him what was wrong, he told me, with all the blood drained from his face, that we had defectors.

"Excuse me?!"

"Sir Madenhausen and four under his command were missing at first light."

You gotta be kidding me... I was surprised that we had such spineless folk still among our number, but in all honesty I felt terrible for Sir Lazne. He'd only been vice commander; all this was well

beyond his pay grade. I'd want to put my head in my hands too if I was in his situation.

"Could they have been captured by the enemy?" I ventured.

"Their things and horses are no longer here. They scarpered for it."

I wanted to clap my own hand to my forehead, but I stopped myself before I could. Man, this was annoying. Knights running away while the adventurers stayed and held the fort? Talk about a scandal.

I couldn't really show off and tell Sir Lazne that all of the Fellowship were present and accounted for, so I merely said that I'd make sure we remained even more vigilant before leaving the manor.

This wasn't good. I knew that the mental health of the troupe was wearing thin, but to think we actually had runners? Where would they even go?

"I-If I may...?"

I heard a voice as I walked and pondered the situation.

"Oh it's you."

It was Ferlin's elderly attendant—who she merely called her manservant. He had a staff in hand to support his broken right leg.

"There were explosions last night, weren't there?" he said.

"There were. A number outside our line of defense. A few of the decoy houses were struck."

"D-Do you think...that they do not value our lives?!"

It seemed he'd had the same thought I did. They were attacking so rashly—what would they have done if they had harmed Ferlin? His fear was natural if the conclusion was that they were attacking us indiscriminately.

"Please have no fear. We will protect everyone. Their attacks will not reach us here."

"Thank you... Please, I beg you..."

However much he clung to me as he pleaded, I was approaching the limits of what I could do. I needed to talk to the lookout to make sure that the enemy never got into range.

"Of course. We will do our best."

"But I have a question... Why have you chosen to garrison yourselves here? Are you hoping for reinforcements to join you?"

As the old man held fast to me, I pondered what I could tell him. In the end I realized that I didn't want him to freak out, so I shared our plans with him: We would wait for the wounded to recover, maintain our supplies, then burst through the enemy's ranks to make our escape.

"I-Isn't that akin to suicide?!"

"Not at all! It's a perfectly valid maneuver! The enemy's entrapment is thin on the ground. We can make use of that and break our way out."

I returned the manservant to his room in hopes it would dull the edges of his panic. Hopefully he would accept our plan. It did seem rash, but I'd reasoned it all out.

"Day one and all of this, huh... I'm worried about what the coming days may bring," I muttered to myself.

I headed to the mess hall, where I saw the happy faces of folk who had their first decent meal in a while. Some Fellows and laborers were showing off their skills in the kitchen, and the mood was cheerful as everyone got to eat what the rain had forbidden them.

"Wow, wurst *and* eggs? What a luxury," I said.

"The chicken coop was untouched. We're thinking of using some of the chickens later to make some soup," came the reply.

I took my boiled egg from the person on KP duty. All the eggs had been boiled together, so it was a bit hard-boiled for my tastes, but it was firm and not too bad. I sprinkled some salt on it, had some black bread, and finally felt calm.

And lunch is going to be chicken? Talk about lavish. My usual bad luck must have gone on holiday if we were fortunate enough to land such a great spread while under siege. Those knights could've had a delicious breakfast too, if only they'd stayed...

[Tips] In any siege, the odds rarely favor the fighters on the offensive end.

“Man, that one was pretty damn close...”

Siegfried made a quick projection of where the explosion had happened from the flash of light that came through the shutter of the sealed window and the roar that came shortly after.

“Eep...”

Siegfried was in the guest room of the village head’s manor. The other buildings meant that the manor wasn’t in any line of fire, making it the safest place to be. He had explained this to Ferlin, yet still she curled in upon herself and whimpered at each explosion.

“M-My lady, please do not worry. It’s all okay.”

Even with her manservant encouraging her, it seemed that Ferlin was unable to calm down. It didn’t matter how physically safe she might have been—she still felt scared.

Charged with watching over her, Siegfried was at a loss for what to do. He had said everything he could to tell her that she was safe, but it was impossible for her to take it in.

“Why? Why are they doing this?”

“What d’you mean?”

“Th-They’re coming to rescue me, aren’t they? So why— Eep!”

More disturbances from another grenade nearby—but still outside the canton’s line of defense—caused the last descendant of the de A Dyne line to cry out once more.

Siegfried didn’t have an answer for her. Even he thought that this endless stream of attacks—each with the power to kill a person in a single hit—bespoke a total lack of interest in whether she lived or died. The enemy had been as persistent as ever, and the explosions continued through the day and into the night. The Fellows must have grown just about used to it, because some stouthearted folk were now able to sleep through the night; however, for the delicate princess, it seemed it was still all too much.

“All I... All I want is to reclaim independence for the western territory! You were born here too, weren’t you?” Ferlin said.

“Yeah, but by the time I was born Ende Erde had belonged to Rhine for ages,” Siegfried replied.

The young adventurer couldn’t exactly understand how Ferlin felt. His home canton of Illfurth had been under Imperial control since his

grandfather's *grandfather's* time. He spoke Rhinian and saw himself as a citizen of the Empire. Just because this land had once been the territory of the local lords didn't mean that he would nod his head when someone said that he too was one of them.

"But the blood of our people is not theirs! Our proud queen and the gods of the old forests are— Eep!"

The hero-hopeful peered out the window, thinking that three blasts in one day was quite a lot as he tried to get a fix on where the grenade had landed. From what he could tell, it seemed like it had touched down among the steel wires, but thanks to Mika's magic the fences would already be growing back into place.

"What is so wrong with the people who were being born here trying to worship their old gods and rely upon the fruit of their own labors?" Ferlin said.

"When you put it like that, it doesn't sound all too bad. But listen, the local lords lost to the Empire, didn't they?"

"Yes, but... But... This beautiful land, this ancient territory is being tainted..."

Siegfried looked over at Ferlin, who was muttering on about the local lords' own justice. He couldn't understand her preaching; he just felt bad for her. He didn't quite agree with Goldilocks, but he knew it was highly likely that Ferlin had been fed this education since she was young. That was why she was ignorant, why she didn't know that without violence no one would listen to anyone else.

Indeed, Ferlin should have realized by now that her people were inciting that same violence in order to get her back. *Wait—bring her back?* Siegfried thought, but he was unable to see what answer lay beyond.

"But listen, Princess, they haven't once asked us to hand you over to them," Siegfried said.

"Wh-What was that?"

"I ain't lying. I dunno why, but they haven't asked us even a single time to surrender. C'mon, you remember, don't you? They used that magic pipe weapon on the first iron carriage that bolted, even though you might've been inside."

Ferlin fell silent. It was still in recent history and she must have started to sense the incongruity about the situation.

"And even now they're not holdin' back against any of those buildings, even though you could be in any of them. We're the ones who are actually doing the most to keep you safe."

"No, I... I..."

"We ain't inclined to mistreat a captured princess. That'd be lawless damn behavior. We're protectin' you because we think no good will come of it if we let them have you."

Well, that last bit's my own opinion, Siegfried thought to himself as he tried to cheer Ferlin up.

"Whoa. Looks like they've started fightin'."

From near the trenches, Siegfried could hear war cries. The Fellows had massed to push the enemy back out.

"They're putting their lives on the line for you. Least you could do is trust us a bit," Siegfried went on.

Internally, he wished he could be out there with his Fellows instead of here, but of course he couldn't say that to Ferlin—who was, for some reason, opening up to him.

With the surprising revelation that there were some nights where being out on the battlefield was simpler than staying huddled down inside, the hero-hopeful pondered how he could nip this young woman and her manservant's anxieties in the bud.

[Tips] All political power originates from violence.

After pushing back the enemy's pestering assault, I drew Schutzwolfe between my arm and body to clean the blood off of her.

This night had been tough. Three grenades had hit Mika's fortified earthen walls and a force of thirty had come at us.

"We don't have any fools who let themselves get injured, do we?" I roared.

"No problems, Boss!" came the encouraging response from Etan.

Very good. I was happy we didn't have anyone green enough to let themselves get hurt by meat puppets who were stupid enough to get caught in the barbed wire and could only obey the simple

commands imbued into the metal plates in their heads. I returned Schutzwolfe to her scabbard.

"Move out and reinforce the trenches! Put the corpses to one side!"

"Roger!"

After giving my command, I took out my pipe. The rain had finally stopped. I took the opportunity to review the state of the field.

I wondered if the enemy could only give simple commands for the meat puppets—hence their choice to attack us from only one side at a time. Despite that, the effects of our own lack of sleep were starting to show. Mika was running low on mana due to the constant need to reinforce the trenches and walls; Margit and her scouts were exhausted from their duties each night; Kaya was fighting a losing battle against our dwindling supplies. Compared to them, we had a much easier time keeping our morale up, since we just had grunt work to do.

"Ngh... I can't...get it...free..."

My Fellows were moving the bodies to be buried all together (to prevent diseases from spreading) but one of them was struggling to remove his sword that was deeply embedded in a felled enemy.

It was Yorgos.

It seemed like his sword had been too huge for a little mensch body. He had struck his foe with a diagonal cut, but it hadn't made it all the way through, having stopped at the stomach. It had sliced right through the shoulder guard, breaking the clavicle, ribs, and breastbone on the way, but it had got caught in the mess of blood and flesh.

"Yorgos, if your sword's like that, just give it a push, not a pull. You'll be able to get through it that way," I said.

"Really? Oh—it worked!"

If it was stuck, then you just needed to complete the cut. The blade found its way through the mess it'd gotten trapped in as if it had never been an issue.

"Thank you so much, Boss."

As I walked toward my bloodsoaked underling who still let his

sword swing *him* around, I felt a sudden presence and squared up. My sword wasn't quite suited to a quick-draw-and-slash technique, but I was ready to meet an attack. I dropped my hips and slipped an inch or so of blade out, my left hand on the scabbard. I honed my senses all around me, ready to strike, when I heard a voice tinged with some bloodlust.

"You win this one."

I recognized the voice. I kept my posture steady and looked over to where the voice had come from to see a figure drop out from the shadows of the eaves. I was surprised to see that her magic worked even in the faint shadows cast by the moon. A tall woman in a splendid evening dress literally melted out of the dark. I knew her too well to ever forget.

"Beatrix," I said.

"You are as sharp as ever," she replied. "To think you would pick up on my presence right after a battle. You're making me lose confidence in myself."

All the way out in this lonesome canton, the assassin I'd had to render almost *limbless* for a time to get one over her had come—presumably not just to say hi. She'd mended well. I had seen her just a little while ago, but I was surprised to see her out on the front lines already. I blinked a few times; she took off a glove to proudly show me what lay underneath.

"Brilliant, isn't it?" Beatrix said. "Prosthetic limbs; the alloys are custom, meant to take to enchantment well. I believe you'll find they're an improvement all-around on what you took from me. I've never been so free. I won't lose to that wolf's fang of yours this time."

I could only stand there as she flexed her new fingers. I had heard that prosthetics existed which could replicate a sense of touch, but to think that someone had received them in order to be sent back into the fray! *Hey, Marquis Donnersmarck? It's not even been a season since she suffered those wounds, you know? You seem like a* crap *boss.*

"What do you need?"

"Now, now. My superior simply told me to deliver something to

you. Tonight I'm merely a messenger pigeon."

Beatrix took off her knapsack and threw it my way. I caught it in one hand and looked inside. It was filled with medicine bottles.

"A restock. I imagine your supplies are running low. Oh, *and*—" she said before disappearing into the darkness once more, reemerging with yet more packages. After three round trips through the shadows, she wiped the sweat from her forehead. She did this with all the ease in the world, but the technique had to have come with its own share of danger. Beatrix gestured to the bags in front of her.

"This contains ammunition; this is all alcohol. Everything you could want before a big confrontation, no?" she said.

"Just how much does Miss Nakeisha know?" I muttered.

I had to admit I was happy for the supplies. We had almost run out of everything Beatrix had given me.

"I am pleased with my new superior," Beatrix said. "She works us hard, but we're not disposable to her."

I caught the letter that Beatrix flung my way between my index and middle fingers. She'd thrown it with such intensity it nearly just bounced off my hand.

I opened it and found a map of the nearby area, along with times and symbols. The black circle must have indicated where the enemy with whom we'd just fought were holed up. Next to it was a picture of a broom and an arrow pointing to succeeding locations for us to clean up. It was clear what it meant to me: if we destroyed the encampments in the order indicated here, then we could create an opening to make our escape.

"How positively kind," I said.

"This little brouhaha originated in the heart of the Empire. My superior's employer is not happy with it. I'm still not fully used to all this, but I'm being worked from east to west..."

"I had been aware, but to have the concrete evidence that this is coming from the central Empire... The west isn't some playground for nobles with too much time on their hands, dammit."

"Those are the rules of the world. They remain the same no matter the age or the place."

The assassin in the splendid dress gestured with her new arm—I noticed that she was now able to reach a larger range than before, so I needed to watch my weak points—as she headed back to the eaves.

"Don't you die, Goldilocks. I still haven't thanked you properly for what you've made of me."

"I'll have to pass on the kind offer. Pass my thanks onto Miss Nakeisha."

"I will. Farewell."

This time, the assassin didn't return after she sank into the shadows.

She really had brought quite the spoiler with her. It was one thing to *suspect* that this whole incident was just a political comedy show for those in the Empire's heartland; *knowing so* was a fair sight worse.

Dammit, I wished they thought about the people that had to clean up their messes.

[Tips] Most pieces of equipment require some minimum degree of strength to wield; however, this isn't referring to the least amount of musculature required to simply hold it—it refers to the requisite strength to use the weapon *as a weapon*.

Late spring was full of unpredictable weather and temperamental rain, but it was still bad for one's mental health to remain cooped up inside all day. With Ferlin moaning that she was going to die and lose her legs from lack of use, Goldilocks decided to relent—he had burst a fair few blood vessels and needed Sir Lazne's intervention when he yelled that he'd happily chop her legs off for her—and so she enjoyed the first taste of fresh air in days.

"Ahh, what splendid weather. Look, Siegfried. See how vast the heavens are."

"Well, yeah. The rain has stopped."

Despite the fact that only the center of the encampment was safe, with guards on lookout to see fifty paces all around, it was

enough for the captured princess to fix her once terrible mood. She was still garbed as a prisoner, but her arms were unbound, and so she spun in circles with her palms facing the skies.

"That's not what I'm saying. First I was stuck inside a carriage for who knows how long, and after that I was forced into a gloomy room with all of its windows shuttered. I cannot explain just how refreshing it is to walk so freely under the sky."

"Yeah, that carriage didn't look nice to be cooped up inside..."

As he walked alongside Ferlin, Siegfried looked up at the skies—finally clear of any rainclouds—and nodded in agreement. Now that he thought about it, Ferlin had been put into quite the terrible situation. Siegfried had survived his own pitiful childhood as the youngest son of a poor farming family, but he hadn't been so unfortunate as to experience what Ferlin had.

"It's the sky of our homeland," she went on. "It's so vast, so blue, so clear."

"The sky looks the same anywhere you go."

"No, no, you're wrong, Siegfried. The sky looks so wonderful because we can see it from our home."

Ferlin crouched down, having spotted a single dandelion—a survivor from the wild trench digging only a few days past—and stroked its petals gently.

"Once upon a time this land was free," Ferlin continued. "The high king ruled this territory right to its ends, and his people lived freely and peacefully under him. The fact that the honorable name of Justus de A Dyne, my proud ancestor, isn't forgotten is testament to that."

Siegfried wondered whether he should chip in with his own rebuttal, but he realized that there was no good in ruining the good mood of a girl with such dark circles under her eyes, so he kept silent. The prejudice from his poor upbringing told him that wherever people and rulers existed together, it didn't matter who ruled them, for blood would always be shed and there would always be poor folks. Still, he knew better than to say so.

Perhaps Ferlin must have unconsciously touched on his kind heart, for she had warmed to Siegfried.

"I love this land, this western territory. The nobles of the Empire call it a barbaric region or look down on it as the boondocks, but look, Siegfried!"

Still crouching down, Ferlin spread her arms wide and looked back at Siegfried with a beaming smile he hadn't seen in a while. It seemed to say that this moment was the most precious thing.

"The grass is lush, the flowers are lovely, the wind is gentle. What else could you want?"

"Dunno... Walls. A roof. If I'm being greedy, a hot fireplace and some sweet mead. At this point, I'd accept some slightly sour ale."

"You're a man without refinement, aren't you?"

"I'm just lowborn, I guess," was all Siegfried could say as Ferlin chuckled at him.

She gave a smile and shook her head. "Very well; next time I'll teach you some local songs. I think you should learn how to be more refined both in your manners and your emotions. Your life will become all the more fulfilled for it."

"I ain't lived such an easy life to spare time to think of that stuff."

"Then I shall teach you myself. I know—you can be my own personal knight!"

The hero-hopeful cocked his head in confusion, but the captured princess paid no heed and instead spoke of her dreams once she was safely returned and welcomed as the last of the high king's bloodline. Once they pushed back the Empire and liberated their peoples before helping her pen some poems about their journey, Siegfried would have all the fame and glory he could want.

"You were the only one who has been kind to me. My manservant at least is never *cold* to me, but even he won't show me that much," she said.

"Uh, what's this stuff got to do with being a knight? And about being refined...?"

"My manservant said that those who are rich of heart have the capacity for an open mind. You have that potential. When the forces who have come to fetch me break through this fortress, I will make sure your life is spared."

Siegfried wanted to make a comment about her holier-than-thou

way of speaking, but he held his tongue. He didn't want Goldilocks to tell him he was being childish. He *also* held back because he wasn't sure if she had forgotten that today was the day that they would break through the enemy. The very same forces who didn't seem to care about what happened to the supposed last descendant of the de A Dyne line. At any rate, these people were no good and would definitely not obediently follow orders, even if the one issuing them had the same blood as a legendary king.

Something Goldilocks said suddenly came to mind: *Both fame and a palanquin should be as light and as flashy as possible.*

"I will show you around this verdant and beautiful land," Ferlin went on. "I won't be the sort of high king who stands in the background issuing orders. I will go all across the lands I rule, doling out aid to all who struggle. I will be a good king."

"And on this little sightseeing tour, make me a poet...?"

"A royal visit, not a sightseeing tour! And, Siegfried, everyone knows that a truly spectacular knight always has the right song for the moment waiting in his throat."

Ferlin had a single finger outstretched as she spoke. Siegfried was a little exasperated by the display, but her talk brought Goldilocks's face to mind, and a strange feeling overcame him. It was true that Erich was a bit haughty and used fancy words. He probably had the right stuff to be a knight—to be sensitive if the situation demanded it, to leverage some measure of literary talent to get ahead. But if someone asked *Siegfried* to be like that? He would have to give a firm no.

After a while of thinking, he couldn't think of a single decent thing to say in return.

"Siegfried?"

"Here."

Siegfried plucked the dandelion that Ferlin had been watching and placed it in her hair. This was all the hero-hopeful could manage when it came to the affectations men put on for women. His cheeks flushed red and he worried if he'd offended her. As he scratched at his own hair, a reply came.

"How dare you end this poor flower's life after it put all that effort

into blooming?!”

“Huh?! Isn’t this what you were talking about?”

“No! Ugh, this is why I said you don’t understand what it means to be refined!”

As Ferlin snapped and smacked him, Siegfried couldn’t piece together what he had done wrong. If he had done this for Kaya, she would have smiled. When they were little and he had seen just how much it made her happy, he’d forgone his own preconceptions of what men should do and learned how to make her a flower crown.

“I was just talking about how beautiful this land was! How heartless must you be to pluck at it after I said that?”

“Aren’t flowers for picking?!”

“How would you feel if someone plucked your hand right off?!”

Although Ferlin continued to rage at Siegfried, who still couldn’t understand why she was so angry, she didn’t remove the flower that he had placed in her hair.

[Tips] A knight cannot be a knight merely by their sword arm. The sayings go that a knight cannot get married unless he can recite at least one romantic ballad, he cannot get ahead if he does not have the gift of the gab, and he must live his life without spilling words that should not be said.

Climax

Climax

The climax marks the beginning of the end. However, do not forget that it shall be a dramatic ending, for better or worse.

Yorgos couldn't sleep a wink that night, and the explosions resounding all around him were only partly responsible. He clutched his sword—one of the few things that had come all the way from home with him—in his arms. He couldn't unstick the gruesome scene of the afternoon before (the blade buried in the corpse, his body straining uselessly to pull it free) from his mind's eye. That his *boss*—his *personal hero*—had seen the whole pitiful performance made his body burn with shame.

Yorgos thought: *What is it that I want to be?*

It was unseemly for a man and he knew it, but he couldn't avoid it: The sight of valiant warriors in the heat of battle stirred something in his heart. However, these were his thoughts at their most base—when he bothered to interrogate it more closely, the young ogre had no notion of where that stirring was leading him, what it would make of him. If someone were to ask him if he wanted to become strong, then he would give a resounding yes. That was an immutable truth. Yet doubts crept in when he asked himself the question if he was happy to become strong simply *as he was*.

He had absconded with this sword when he fled from his home because it seemed like a symbol of strength. Yorgos's heart had been captured a long time ago watching the warriors of his clan roar across the battlefield, wading into a storm of swords and a hail of fire with bright grins, easing their parched throats with blood splatter

and wearing each wound like armor. Those women's smiles never faltered, whether they were charging the enemy or returning home.

All the same, Yorgos knew better than anyone that his sword was in many ways far too heavy for him—too much for his body, too much for his status.

Back home, one warrior had chosen to teach him. Maybe she had taken pity on the poor lad who secretly watched the girls of the tribe receive their brutal training and copied their swings with a piece of wood. Or maybe it was a flight of fancy, a way to spend the time. At any rate, she taught him the correct form: how to hold the blade at rest and how to swing it properly. She didn't allow Yorgos to call her "master" or anything like that, but she was still a proud and valiant warrior who died a proud and valiant death.

She died during Yorgos's seventh battle as a support soldier. In a nearby city-state, a dispute had arisen over water rights, and before long factions and alliances had sprung up between the nations in play. The dispute erupted into a full-blown war without anyone ever comprehending the full scope of the situation.

The Cyclops tribe backed the city-state with all the water and headed to the plain, where the battle was due to unfurl. Everyone thought that this mess would end after a little martial peacocking on both sides. All the city-states of the Southern Sea knew that strife would only enfeeble themselves; there hadn't been a large-scale war in the region for the past few decades. Instead, each side would amass armies to show off their economic power and their diplomacy in bloodless struggle. A war between thousands was *unthinkable* in those parts.

But fate had other plans.

Maybe some fool had gone overboard with their provocations; maybe a foolish soldier accidentally loosed their arrow—whatever the case, an impromptu battle broke out.

Even trusted to the best of folk, war was the most foolish and wasteful of all human inventions. When its affairs were left in the hands of true and proper idiots, it took on its truest and most ghoulish face.

The soldiers were in formation, but their ranks were designed to

look good, and so no one was placed effectively. The front line was occupied by a row of noble children who had never fought before and believed that a weapon's worth was measured by the shine on it. There were even some whose armor amounted to little more than an honor guard's glitzy regalia.

The Cyclops tribe had been entrusted with the lives of these young scions by their employers' king. They were to lay down their lives at the slightest provocation if it meant their charges could return unscathed. They had taken to the order with heartfelt cheers, naturally.

They'd formed a suicide corps, a single nigh-impenetrable wall of ogrish fighters between their fragile wards and thousands of foes. As one they'd charged into the enemy's formation and killed, killed, killed. The plan from the beginning had been to make a show of the slaughter on the way to the enemy's leadership. While they garnered the enemy's attention, their allies would make good on the distraction and flee the field. It would have been lunacy for anyone else, but it was a perfectly pragmatic strategy for a band of ogres.

But in their blood frenzy, they found that they had felled a general they'd never expected to reach. As they hoisted up the head of the enemy's king, they realized this had simply invited in a bigger problem. No one had foreseen this success. No one imagined their challengers would prove too weak to endure a direct confrontation. They had overdone it and killed the only one on the enemy side that had the power to end the war.

Who now would be able to find a point of compromise?

Their employers' king had wanted his rival sovereign's nose bloodied sufficiently to shut him up. He'd never wanted him *dead*. They'd escalated an international slapfight with a blow to the nethers. The enemy's anger boiled right over, beyond quelling now.

From a nearby hill, the backup squadron watched the battle unfurl as they saw all the other ogres fight to their deaths against the thousandfold army. They were in awe; they were *jealous*.

To their surprise, the warriors used the head they'd won as a decoy to begin their escape. The head was held high on a spear; they swung it around as if to say, "Look, the head is here! If you

want it back then come and get it!” as they cut through the forces. Every time the holder of the head killed yet another enemy who came to claim both the head and the prestige, she would pass the head onto someone else and remain in the fray so that she could fight to the end.

The last survivor of this ridiculous strategy was the ogre who had, for the brief time, taken Yorgos under her wing.

She was well and truly strong. Despite bearing the spear and its head in one hand, she managed to protect the rear of the fleeing group of allies as she fought like mad, slicing, striking, strangling, crushing her enemies with every limb available to her. In the end, despite her body bristling with spears, she still did not fall to her knees. She breathed her last in battle still standing as she held that spear aloft.

Among the backup squadron and the scant survivors, the story passed into legend—an object lesson in the nature of an enviable death.

But did Yorgos really think that?

“Yeah... I want to die in a way that no one will ever forget me.”

Yorgos realized that he wanted to go out in a way that guaranteed even a hundred years from now, tales would still be told—the kind you heard at festival time, maybe. It wasn’t the right sort of dream for someone like him; he was supposed to be comfortable with anonymity, service, a modicum of security.

So he’d left, and sought a real hero to train under. Someone like his first teacher.

He’d chosen an upstart, a newly minted name in the business. If he worked under the slayer of the Infernal Knight, the man whose sword served justice and justice alone, then perhaps he would earn his glorious death in battle.

“Then what I need to do is...”

Before he realized it, he could hear birdsong. Yorgos raised his head with a gasp and saw that the dawn was filtering in through the cracks in the slatted windows. He’d passed through the night picking over the memories of when his dreams had first taken root.

It had taken so much of his life to arrive here—to the moment of

his wildest battle yet. Today the Fellowship of the Blade would break through the enemy, to slay everyone who dared stand in their way. After the battle they'd quit the canton. No one would be left behind —they would fight, win, and be free.

It was a mad plan, but it was the sort of madness that was right for him and all his Fellows.

Yorgos pulled himself to his feet and his sword fell from his arms, crashing to the floor with a great clangor. Some of his Fellows woke up and snapped at him that it was still too early. Yorgos flushed with embarrassment as he put his sword on his back and headed out to the yard to wake himself up.

Practicing his swing alone had long since been the swiftest way he'd found to a calm heart.

[Tips] Each ogre tribe has a different ideal of a glorious death, but for Yorgos's Cyclops tribe, they believe that continuing to fight while surrounded by overwhelming numbers until you finally fall is the noblest death there is.

"All right, has everyone got a drink?"

In place of Sir Lazne, I stood on a makeshift platform in the canton's plaza near the manor and raised my own cup.

In front of me were sixty-four Fellows and a hundred or so of the others who had made it to today. Everyone had been given some booze yesterday, the night before our departure, and now they were all waiting with cups in hand wondering when the moment would arrive.

"Soon we will break through the enemy blockade and make our retreat. We will be aiming right for the enemy's heart! We will fight through the toughest battlefield and safely return home!"

Some people thought that this was meant in jest; ripples of laughter and smiles made their way across the crowd. Those who had the courage to put their lives on the line to enter battle all chuckled as they wondered whether such a gallant *retreat* really existed.

"Yes, when you view this with a cool head, it seems rather rash,"

Mika said.

"You just gotta get used to it, Prof," Sieg said. "Erich's the sorta guy who'll say something as mad as this twice a season."

"I can hear you, Siegfried! Don't call this mad! This is the best shot we're going to get!"

More peals of laughter rang out at the banter between me and my comrade; I was certain that this would go well. A good warrior is one who can go into a deadly battle with a smile. Who fears death who knows that here on the field of battle, they *are* death?

"We are lucky that today the Harvest Goddess's anger has subsided. I think it's time we pay the bastards who've made this long, dire trip of ours so miserable back a hundredfold!"

"YEAH!"

"Very good! Now...cheers!"

"Cheers!"

As everyone called out in unison, they downed their drinks and threw the cups to the ground. The earth before us wasn't covered with shards like when noble armies did this with glass cups, but I hoped it'd inflame everyone's courage appropriately.

"Now then—move out!"

At my command, my Fellows and the soldiers and knights under Sir Lazne began the preparations for departure. We had been working carefully and slowly until now, so that the enemy wouldn't cotton on to our plans, but now we needed to move fast. Everyone rushed out to hitch the horses to their carriages, don their armor, and finish all their preparations so that we could hightail it.

Just as I was thinking that things would be busy before we finally left, Ferlin approached me again. Ever since she had learned of our plan, she had changed her tune and decided to lecture me incessantly.

"Won't you rethink this? This is foolish. How many people will die?"

Ferlin clung onto Siegfried as she spoke to me, her eyes full of tears as she realized a real battle would be coming soon. She had been right here, breathing in the fires of battle while we were bunkered down, but she was still terrified.

"I think you may be misunderstanding something," I said. "We all attend to adventures with the awareness that we may die."

It made sense that she knew nothing of war. The point stood that it was far more foolish to keep holing up here waiting for aid that would never come. It would be nothing more than a drawn-out suicide as things turned hellish while we fought for dwindling resources and our formations broke down.

We were far more likely to win if we took the fight to the enemy while we were well and our morale was high.

"This will all end if you just hand me over! You may be an Imperial, but there are many among you who were born in this land. Don't take my people to their deaths!"

"You are laboring under another misunderstanding. Everyone under me is both an Imperial and a Fellow of the Blade."

We were all here as adventurers of the Fellowship. I'll concede it might've been a "No hard feelings, but..." situation, but a job was a job. We would make it home and then give whoever needed to hear it an earful. How would we be able to show our faces if we lost her here and now?

If we picked up a reputation for fleeing with our tail between their legs, then we couldn't proudly say we were Fellows of the Blade.

"B-But...what if Siegfried dies?"

My comrade made a strange sound at his name.

I turned around to see him shaking his head, all the blood drained from his face. Every inch of his posture screamed that he didn't do anything wrong; I was predisposed to believe him. Maybe this was a case of Stockholm syndrome? I'd chosen him specifically because I knew he wouldn't let his feelings get the best of him, after all.

"I know, so just go," I said.

"Dammit, what did I do?!" Siegfried said before dashing into the manor to get his armor on.

Sieg, man, I can't tell if you've got luck with the ladies or not...

As I was thinking this, I turned to Ferlin, who was still pointlessly imploring me, only to see someone else clinging to her too.

"M-My lady is right! No, enough of that... Hand that *thing* over and you will be spared! It is a small price to pay!"

Ferlin's manservant, his hands scraping at his hair, spoke louder than I thought his frail body could muster.

"Wh-What...?" Ferlin said.

"Quiet, you! I was... I was merely asked to watch over you, but you are not Ferlin de Ledea Dyne!"

The fear of death had put a mad tremor in his milky eyes. He ripped chunks of hair from his scalp in his fit of panic. He'd completely lost it. I was struggling to parse his words too much to react at the speed I would've preferred.

"This *thing* is one of the College's experiments! They used psychosorcery to convince her that she was the last descendant of de A Dyne! She's a fake created to destroy the local lords!"

"Wh-What are you saying, manservant of mine? I'm Ferlin! Ferlin...Sechstia..."

"Do you hear yourself? 'Sechstia' means 'sixth daughter'! Is that really a name fit for a descendant of a high king? Fine, go on, tell me, then! Tell me where you grew up. Who your first love was. Tell me when you first came to this land that you adore so damn much!"

I was too late to shut the old man up, but I gave him a good cuff upside the head regardless.

Dammit, so that's it, huh...

I'd thought something was weird ever since I learned that the College was in on this somehow. Her pointless prisoner's garb, the eye patch over her left eye—the answer had been right there since the start. I should have noticed sooner.

Ferlin had been taken from who-knew-where and made a test subject for the College—an expendable but convincing enough forgery of a valuable political pawn created through thaumaturgical body modification and brainwashing. That was why no one gave a damn about whether she survived any of the bombings.

To the local administration who'd been told strictly what they needed to know, she was nothing more than chum in the water. With her in place, they had cause enough to point at the local lords and claim that they had been trying to raise up a new figurehead to

aid in their revolts.

The local lords weren't all fools either. If they could make her death the result of an Imperial mishap, then they could leverage her martyrdom to establish a more unified front against the Empire. That was why even though they'd approached us as if they meant to take her back, they'd used methods that could've killed her from the start.

We were all just *clowns*.

"I... I..."

Just as Ferlin's manservant—correction, *the College's lackey*—had said, she couldn't remember her past. Her face was twisted in despair; tears started to trickle out from underneath her eye patch. She started to pull at her hair. I felt a sudden welling of mana.

Damn it all! I know you don't want to die, but did you really have to sit on this all the way up to the eleventh hour?!

"Aaaaaagh!"

I didn't make it in time to stop her from tearing off the restraints on her hands. In the next moment, an explosion of directionless mana burst forth from her and took me off my feet, sending me hurtling back. I hit the ground and my vision went dizzy. Through the fog, I saw Ferlin—no, *Sechstia*—scraping at the rest of her bindings and pulling her eye patch free.

Her left eye peeped out from her silvery bangs. It shone with a gray light gathered from some metaphysical depth within her, and she howled as her sense of self crumbled.

Somehow she'd been furnished with the very same witch eye as the Ash-Eyed King himself, Justus de A Dyne had once borne.

"I am... I am... I'm Ferlin! No matter what anyone says... I am Ferlin Sechstia de Ledea Dyne!"

Sechstia had been scraping so furiously at her bindings that her nails had all ripped from their beds. Her fingertips were covered in blood, but soon they crystallized to form deadly new claws. Her surging mana had activated hidden potentials of her flesh; on pure instinct, she'd taken hold of her energies and used them to optimize herself for violence.

This was *not* good.

"To your knees! I am the Ash-Eyed King's very blood, Ferlin!"

Her ashen eye glared at everything around her. In the next instant, I saw Fellow after Fellow drop to their knees. I had been in the middle of getting up, but even my body shuddered to a halt for a moment. I felt it freeze on the floor, but I pushed through it and forced myself to stand.

Crap, crap, crap! At this rate our front line's gonna fall apart!

"What the hell's going on?!"

"S-Stay put, Siegfried!"

I was too late to stop my comrade. He had rushed into the plaza and saw Sechstia.

"Hey, Siegfried... I... I'm Ferlin, aren't I?"

"What the—?! O-Of course you are! You're the one we've been protecting this whole time!"

Sieg didn't know the situation; he'd just said what was plain to him. I didn't even have the time to think about how this might be some kind of debuff for being the protagonist. Sechstia fell into a mad rage and roared as her Conqueror's Eye gleamed.

"Then accept *me*! Not Sechstia, but Ferlin de Ledea Dyne!"

"Ngh... What's this weird feeling?!"

Sechstia's witch eye allowed her to render all those in her sight under her control. I'd heard rumors that the high king's head was

never returned and had been taken by the Empire... Of course the College would want to pick apart any witch eye that powerful and figure out what made it tick. They would have extracted it, preserved it, and taken great pains to reproduce its effects. I wasn't sure if this was a failure or a prototype, but of *course* they would try to repurpose their imperfect test subject for other uses once she'd outlived her original purpose!

"What...the hell...is this?! Dammit!" Siegfried muttered.

"Accept me, Siegfried! If only just you...!"

As Siegfried fought against her psychosorcery, I could see that our enemies, aware of the unfurling chaos, had begun to approach. It really felt like my day was running out of ways to get worse.

"C'mon, ya bastards! I don't know what the hell happened, but the plan's changed! Move out!"

As I was wondering how to get my body in gear again when I felt like a sack of rocks, I heard Dietrich's war cry echo through the plaza. I looked over and saw that she was leading Martyn and the rest of our light cavalry across the trenches to meet our enemies' charge and lay them flat.

"The battlefield waits for no one! GRAAAH!"

As Dietrich smashed through the pack of foes with her halberd, the cavalry moved in through the gap she created to spear the rest of them. To top it off, I saw the mud—already deep and mucky due to days of rain—start to grow even more viscous.

"What a pain," Mika said. "I know that plans change, but I don't like not knowing what's even going on!"

He'd thrust his staff into the ground and created a quagmire too thick for the enemy's reinforcements to attack our cavalry. As they got caught in the muck, their arrows and their grenades all missed their mark, simply hitting the ground.

"Siegfried, focus!"

"Is this...about...focus?!"

Siegfried put all his energies into his body and forced himself up from his kneeling position. He tightened his grip on the spear that had been threatening to fall out of his hands moments ago.

"Ferlin... I dunno what the hell happened...but you gotta explain

why you're hurtin' my comrades!"

"You too? Even *you* won't listen to me, Siegfried?"

"Answer my question, dammit!"

But Ferlin didn't answer. Her bangs were usually symmetrical, but she'd ruffled them as she clapped a hand over her right eye. Foamy blood spluttered out of her mouth as she spoke. She didn't even notice that the force of how she moved caused the slightly withered dandelion to fall from her hair.

"Then...fine... I will return! I will force you all to bend the knee for me, and I shall return as the one true Ferlin de Ledea Dyne!"

Ferlin barked an order that bordered on a scream. The Eye of the Conqueror bade that our Fellows...attack us.

"B-Boss...!"

"Stupid body... Stop! STOP!"

"I can't...control myself!"

Etan, Karsten, and the others in the plaza advanced toward us to cut us down. I'd only just escaped from the eye's influence, so my own body was shaking, but I forced it into action and evaded their strikes.

"Holy—! C'mon, Mathieu! Put some backbone into it!" Sieg shouted.

"I'm so sorry, Big Bro Dee! You g-gotta run away!" the werewolf shouted back.

As for Siegfried, Mathieu had just tried to cut him open. Siegfried had managed to stop the blow with his spear handle.

"How many times do I have to tell ya... Call me Siegfried, ya knucklehead!"

As he responded the way he always did, he delivered a powerful kick to Mathieu's solar plexus and another to his drooping head, knocking him out cold.

Of course! If they're unconscious, they can't be dominated.

"This is gonna hurt, but forgive me, guys," I said.

"Huh? B-Boss?! Gwah!"

Knocking someone out safely was harder than it looked. I'd read enough manga where a quick punch to the gut or a chop to the back of the neck put someone out of commission, but in real life you

couldn’t just put someone’s lights out like that. It was ugly and it hurt like hell.

Karsten was wearing a helmet, so I struck him with the butt of Schutzwolfe’s handle and shook his brains about enough to drop him. If you screwed up even a little, you could give someone a *lethal* cerebral contusion, but his head was sturdier than his vertebrae, so he’d have to grin and bear it.

“Cut them down! Kill them!” Ferlin shouted.

“Stop it, Ferlin! Dammit, what’s got you so upset?!” Siegfried called back.

My comrade and I naturally fell into our back-to-back formation and got to defending ourselves. I’d receive an attack and Sieg would strike them with his scabbard; Sieg would redirect a blow and I’d knock them out with my sword butt.

“Erich! The Fellows are going berserk! What’s happening?!”

Margit’s voice came ringing through Voice Transfer. She was near the carriages, leading our preparations for the departure.

Right... The range of a witch eye was what you could see! That meant anyone in Ferlin’s sights was under her power! I got Margit abreast of the situation.

“Kaya and I will sort things on this end!”

“What do you mean ‘sort things’?!”

“I mean...this!”

I heard a boom and saw plumes of white smoke rising up from near the carriages. That was Kaya’s tear gas! You needed to wear a mask or apply her special salve to your face or you’d have to put up with an excruciating assault on all of your mucus membranes. It was a speedy way to neutralize our allies without actually harming them. If they couldn’t move how they wanted, then they couldn’t be controlled.

I heard Margit cough. *“I’ll tie them up and take away their weapons. I leave your end to you.”*

“Got it! Thanks!”

There was nothing more reassuring than knowing your rear was safe. I felt the motivation return to me as I continued to knock out my allies as gently as I could manage. They would have headaches

and dizzy spells when they woke up, but they'd have to tough it out.

"Raaaagh! Why! Why won't you accept me? Why don't you listen to my orders?!"

As Sechstia ran out of people to fight on her behalf, she personally came to us. Her talons were sharp. Sieg and I realized that it would be dangerous even in our armor, so we pushed off each other and moved out of the way. Ferlin tumbled through the gap we'd left.

"Ferlin, stop!"

"I... I have nothing else! Nothing else...than to become Ferlin!"

I left Siegfried to deal with her as she swung her claws about and I faced Etan and Yorgos.

"Tch, so even you two don't have the guts for it! Show me you can fight it!" I said.

"I-I'm so sorry, Boss! M-My body...won't listen...!" Etan said.

"It matters not! Pretend this is training and come at me!"

Even our oldest member was sloppy! I held up Schutzwolfe in a horizontal stance to take his full-power vertical slash...or so I made it seem. I shifted to the right, just barely clear of his strike. I twisted my waist and knees back to stop my momentum and let the blow that would have shattered my beloved blade crash into the earth.

"Huh... Hrgh?!"

I took advantage of the huge opening he'd left me and got a solid hit in. My target was the place where I could give his brains the most severe rattling I could manage. For audhumbla, that was their horns. I lightly struck the tip of his horn with the flat part of my sword, and Etan collapsed to his knees as the power left him.

"You're next, Yorgos! Come at me with all you've got!"

"B-Boss, I...!"

I easily evaded his huge sword.

"You've been an interesting one. Ever since I met you."

"H-Huh?"

"Do you want to be an ogre warrior? Or do you want to be a strong swordsman?"

He responded to my question with a confused grunt. This was something I'd been wondering for a while now.

“Do you want to charge through the battlefield, swinging an ogre’s sword like an *ogre* warrior? Or do you simply wish to become a strong swordsman? I’m asking what it is you want to become!”

The two options I was giving may seem like they amounted to the same thing, but as a swordsman, they were leagues apart to me. An ogre’s sword existed merely to be swung around by an ogre. It was nothing like the swords that mensch and other races of similar size used. It could crush anything with its overwhelming metal heft, and with the right technique it became a miniature WMD. I wouldn’t even know how to start swinging the damn thing. It was just entirely beyond me.

On the other hand, a swordfighter chose the correct option for them and fought in a way that suited them—or at least those were my thoughts on it. A strong swordfighter isn’t strong merely because they have a good weapon. They are strong because they know *how* to use their weapon to the best of its ability.

Working backward from this swordfighting philosophy, Yorgos wasn’t succeeding at either. In my eyes, no matter how much he trained, his ogre sword was too much for him. It was too long, too heavy. Even a lifetime spent lugging around ammunition hadn’t been enough to give him the leverage he needed. He had been struggling to swing it around even in this battle. Sure, a hit from that would be enough to pulverize a mindless meat puppet, it wouldn’t work on a true pro. I could easily take him down; so could Siegfried. Hell, so could Etan and the rest of the old guard.

That was how far forcing himself to use that weapon was taking him. Even if he came at me with a genuine intention to kill me, I could easily dodge out of the way. It pained me to say this, but unfortunately I didn’t have the wherewithal to teach Yorgos how to be an *ogre* swordsman.

“You came to the Fellowship because you want to be strong, right?” I said.

“I...did...”

“But more than that, you admired the ogre swordfighters of your tribe enough to leave your home.”

“Yeah...”

“So...what do you want?”

“To... To become strong!”

Yorgos’s strike that came alongside this roar had real tenacity behind it; it was his finest attack so far. Which is why I chose not to take it and ducked underneath.

Heh. You’re just a young dreamer like the rest of us...

If he kept fighting as a Fellow, then the time would come sooner or later where he found himself in a true fight for his life, held in the grip of mortal terror from start to finish, dancing on a knife’s edge over oblivion. If his sword skills were still half-baked, he’d die. Without question. As his master, I had no choice but to put him in this corner, so that he could finally decide what his answer was.

“They may seem similar, but becoming strong and becoming an ogre swordsman are two different things, Yorgos.”

“B-Boss, I...”

“So carve this into your heart! A swordfighter who cannot serve their ideals will fall apart before he can blink! So tell me! How will you become strong?! How will you use that strength?!”

“I will fight! And no one! Will ever forget it!”

With each breathless swing interrupting his words, his angle grew steadier, more precise, better honed. He’d been training earnestly. I received every attack with the respect it deserved. It was difficult to deflect his heavy strikes, but it was the role of the master to accept his student’s swings.

“I want to have a dramatic death...that will live on in everyone’s minds!”

I let his strength win out and pretended to stagger in order to create an opening, but despite the fact that his body was being controlled, Yorgos didn’t miss my cue; he lifted his sword above his head. His stance was for a straight, vertical chop—the first I taught in the Fellowship.

“I like your fire!”

I took it head-on. I struck a moment faster than him, and as his blade came barreling down, I struck at his pommel as if using magic. My Disarm skill and ungodly Dexterity score came through in the clutch once again.

"Whoa... Gwagh!"

As Yorgos fell forward from the shock of losing his sword, I caught his body with my knees and gave him a strong strike in the stomach. As he froze up, I rushed behind him and drew my arm around his neck.

"I like your resolve, and that was a good swing! You will become a warrior no one will ever forget, Yorgos."

"B-Boss..."

I had him in a lock, and after I put a little juice into my hold, I felt the energy leave his huge body as he crashed to the ground. Yorgos's face in profile was peaceful; he looked like a tuckered out but satisfied sleeping child.

"Sleep now, Yorgos. Let your own philosophy of the blade germinate within you. Ponder what it means to become strong."

And that was almost everyone dealt with.

Now then, Siegfried... Wait, why was he in a pinch with his spear on the ground?!

[Tips] Project Ember was the name of the research project enacted by Setting Sun and Midheaven scholars in the Imperial College of Magic in the hopes of replicating the Conqueror's Eye. They managed to procure their funding by claiming that the end results would provide new measures with which to pacify the local lords of Ende Erde. The project was given its name as a nod to its objectives, in a perverse sort of way—keeping the embers of the burning rebel heart of the outland alive.

The test subjects were given the pet name "Tin-Silver Jungfrau." In the Empire, tin is looked down upon as "fake silver" due to its similar appearance but far lower value.

Siegfried hadn't heard Ferlin's manservant's spiel; he was entirely lost. Naturally, the fact that Ferlin was now on a great screaming row about how she *wasn't* Ferlin, *had never been* Ferlin, but could finally *become* Ferlin if she could just *kill all the witnesses* and return to her masters.

He didn’t know what was going on, but he forced his body to move.

“Don’t move! Don’t resist, Siegfried!”

“Quit...that crap! Who the hell...would let themselves die just ’cause someone else said so?!”

The hero-hopeful forced his body to resist the effects of Ferlin’s witch eye and leaped into action. Ferlin swung her arms about her to keep him from getting close. Despite how thin they were, the rumbling sound that came as they cut through the air told Siegfried that he would be better off not getting hit. He used his spear to fend Ferlin off in kind, but as he continued to swing and weave with it, he felt his body grow heavier and heavier.

“You were the only one...who was kind to me...”

“That’s got...nothing to do with this!”

Her eye’s power continued to amplify. The more time Siegfried spent under its gaze, the harder it was to fight back. The destruction of Ferlin’s restraints was only making it worse. They had blocked the mana that now ran through her body. Just as blood would return to your limbs after you’d been tied up, her body was waking up and returning to its original potential.

The people who had created Ferlin’s witch eye might have had shallow, soulless justifications for their project, but they’d done their work well. They had played with Justus de A Dyne’s head—kept locked away in the deepest part of the College in a sealed storage space for only the most cursed items—for years, and decay somehow never touched it. The effects they had replicated from his eye were the real deal.

The problem was that Justus’s eye was so unique that it was nigh impossible to produce a test subject compatible with it. Of the twenty guinea pigs they’d sourced, only six had survived. The research team had wanted to create a class of human weapon that could be configured out of any dope procured from off the street, and so they were branded with the seal of failure.

Of the six survivors, test subject number six—codenamed *Sechs*tia—had the highest capabilities, and so, along with her sisters, she was sent to the western territory in order to foment trouble with

the local lords. By some stroke of fate, she had ended up crossing swords with the Fellowship of the Blade.

"Die, Siegfried! DIE! So that...I can become Ferlin!"

"Ngh!"

Siegfried must have been under the eye's effects for too long, because Ferlin caught his next thrust. She grabbed the weapon just under the spearhead and brought it to a halt. With her bloody nails, she moved to twist it away. Siegfried realized losing his weapon was better than being thrown to the ground. He tossed his beloved spear aside and quickly drew the sword at his waist.

Siegfried claimed that he could only use the sword well enough to protect himself in a pinch; still, he met the fallen princess's strike. She reached her hands out to strangle him, but his blade held sideways in front of his neck kept her back. Droplets of blood and sparks scattered.

"I... I'm Ferlin!"

"I know that! What's wrong with being the Ferlin that *I* know?!"

"That's..."

Ferlin's pressure faltered for a moment. Siegfried realized he could knock her down and put some more strength in his legs, but the bloodlust welled up in Ferlin once again. The hope that had remained was now only the ruins of everything she had once believed in.

"I am Ferlin de Ledea Dyne! Die, die, die, Siegfried!"

"Grh, dammit all! Are you serious?!"

Ferlin had finally reached a point where she could get her Conqueror's Eye to give more concrete commands. The hero-hopeful's arms shook as his blade moved toward his neck. A mere moment ago the sword had been pushing back Ferlin's bloody claws, but now it was moving closer and closer to the soft flesh of his neck. Siegfried was assailed with an indescribable fear and he tried to fight back, but it wasn't a matter of strength. The nerves in his arms were refusing the signals from his brain. Just as the first beads of blood formed at the lad's neck...

"Urk..." Ferlin spluttered.

"Tch, is this not enough to kill you?!" came a familiar voice.

A sword pierced through Ferlin's chest, stopping just shy of Siegfried's breastplate. Behind Ferlin was Erich, who had stabbed her right through the heart.

This, it turned out, was insufficient to *stop* her. She forcibly drew upon her well of mana to repair her wounded heart. As Erich's blade stuck fast within her, her body was already repairing.

"You cur... You deserve to die too!" she said.

Erich was twisting the blade to try and aggravate the wound as much as he could, but he couldn't stop the repairs. In order to make her body compatible with the incredible power of Justus's eye, every inch of it had been magically enhanced.

Ferlin twisted her head around and looked straight at Erich. Just as he realized the trouble he was in, it was too late. Her eye's powers had already broken through his Sympathetic Barrier. Erich's brain was already stiffening up as her eyes sent orders through his. This wasn't like the command she had given earlier when she had just unleashed her powers. Erich's body started to lose strength bit by bit.

"Grah... Do it...Siegfried!"

"Grh... GRAAAH!"

A witch eye's range was only what it could perceive. Its influence was lost as soon as it was turned away. Knowing the limits of a human's field of vision, Erich had chosen to attack from behind. His plan had been to kill her in one fell swoop, but he realized that if her body had evolved to such a state that such methods wouldn't cut it, he'd have to leave the felling blow to his comrade.

"Rgh..."

Siegfried took up a half-sword stance and pushed back in order to slice through Ferlin's neck, severing first a vital artery and then her spine, denying her the option to regenerate. His sword skills had become practically instinctual, and his blade cut true. He had managed to wound Ferlin so grievously that she wouldn't be able to recover both it and her heart at once.

Ferlin started coughing, and her body collapsed to the ground. She fell toward Siegfried, who couldn't stop himself from catching her. It was clear to him that she was already halfway across death's

door.

"Why... Why did this have to happen?"

"If... If I can die like this, then...I can die...still as Ferlin... This was...best..."

As Ferlin breathed a final thank you, Siegfried could say nothing in response. All that he could do was howl as his confusion took hold of him.

[Tips] The Conqueror's Eye is a natural catalyst that allows its wielder to give orders to those in their line of sight. This catalyst utilizes a number of incredibly potent psychosorceries. However, its effects stop at the limits of the user's vision.

Ending

Ending

Now then, it’s almost time to wrap things up. But don’t forget that the falling of the curtain merely brings with it a little time to prepare until the next curtain rises.

“She was just someone I’d watched over for a bit... And she was so scared...that the people who were meant to come save her were attacking her so violently... So why...?”

“Isn’t it obvious why you feel this way? It’s because you’re a kind man, Siegfried.”

I patted Siegfried’s shoulder. He was slumped on the ground crying next to Sechstia’s body.

I looked around and analyzed the situation—it seemed the battle was over. The enemies had made use of the chaos over here and had begun their assault, but when they saw Sechstia collapse they had disengaged and escaped. All that was left were the damaged meat puppets left to struggle as they waited for death to take them.

It was then that I realized something. The enemy probably just wanted to confirm that the last descendant of the de A Dyne line was dead.

After all, she possessed a terribly powerful witch eye. It might have been a fake, but it was still terrifying, and the ones who decided to raise her up on a palanquin could very well have ended up crushed beneath it. That meant that many must have come to the conclusion that eliminating her was the more preferable option. Otherwise I couldn’t explain just why they’d been so insistent on maintaining such a deadly bombardment for days on end.

Perhaps both the Empire and the local lords had concluded that

they were best off with her dead. What a terribly sad position to be put in.

"We gotta bury her," my comrade said.

"Agreed. Let's cremate her too. So that no one can use her again."

Even I couldn't keep my pity locked away, so I gave my friend this piece of advice: If we wanted her to rest in peace, then we couldn't just bury her. Someone would be bound to dig her up and use her head and eye for illicit means, and it would all play out just as it had today, all over again. If we reduced her to ash and returned her to the heavens, what remained of her dignity would be left intact indefinitely.

"I was thinking I'd make sure to write 'Ferlin' on her gravestone."

"You really are kind. Do what you think is best."

I thought maybe Siegfried would benefit from some time alone, so I took my pipe out and made for the trenches. There I found my Fellows, the knights and their retinues, and our warhorses all sweaty and exhausted from the battle. Mika was there too, panting after using his magic over such a wide area.

"Good work, Mika, Dietrich," I said.

"Ugh, this was quite the trial. Do you have fights like this every time?" Mika asked.

"Not every time. Maybe two or three times per season."

"Huh. So that's why I can't catch up to you," Deitrich said.

She had worked up a sweat heavier than any of the horses, so I tossed her a cloth to wipe herself down. She took it and lifted up her top to start wiping the sweat from her top half, but she was showing some serious underboob, so I gave her a smack on her behind to get her to show at least a *little* modesty.

"My, oh my... I'm running on empty," Mika said.

"You did great out there, Mika. If we didn't have you, it would've been way worse. I really can rely on you."

Mika was slumped on the ground and I reached a hand to help him up. He gripped my hand back, and I noticed it was *softer* than before.

"Mika?" I said.

“Looks like my transition’s starting,” they said with a chuckle. “I’m looking forward to seeing everyone’s reactions in two days!”

“You’re enjoying this, huh?”

“I suppose so.”

With a dash of worry for my friend, who seemed to have picked up quite the naughty habit in the capital, I brought them to the carriage so they could rest and recuperate. There I saw what was, to be blunt, quite the terrible scene.

“I’m happy to see you safe, Sir Lazne,” I said.

“Safe? I can barely see! I can’t smell a thing and my throat and nose feel like they’re on fire.”

Everyone who had been hit by Kaya’s tear gas concoction had swollen eyelids. Their eyes looked like those of a manga character whose glasses had been stolen. Their noses and their lips were red and sore. Their faces were going to hurt like hell for the next few rounds in the bath...

“I will explain the details when things have calmed down a bit more. I’d advise everyone wash their face first,” I said.

“I shall,” Sir Lazne said before erupting in a fit of coughs.

I watched him and a few knights head off and pondered how the hell I would actually explain all this. To be honest, this whole little plot probably started in the College because some scholars wanted a little bit more walking around money and figured they could have some fun testing the limits of what they could do at the same time.

This affair had been too ill-conceived for Marquis Donnersmarck; too roundabout and obnoxious to execute for Lady Agrippina. This haphazard script seemed like it was penned by a layman.

At any rate, that didn’t stop this whole thing from being a big pain in the ass.

“We ran into quite the heap of trouble this time too, didn’t we?” Margit said. With slightly puffy eyes herself, she leaped toward me. I caught her and pressed my face into her neck.

“Yeah, you’re telling me...”

Her cool body temperature and quick heartbeat reminded me that I was alive. We had survived.

“So then. What comes next?”

"Air some grievances and do some cleanup..."

"Cleanup?"

"I'd like to have some proper adventures for a while," I said, looking up to the sky.

Recently I hadn't been on any proper adventures. Busting drug rings, protecting a fake princess—I'd had my fill of that sort of stuff. I wanted something straightforward and prosocial. Save a canton. Lighten someone's load a little.

With my gaze toward the heavens, I gave a little prayer for a decent adventure, but all I got in return was that pleasant after-rain breeze that brought with it the fresh smell of the earth.

[Tips] The gods sometimes answer people's prayers, but Their will is always prioritized; when one's wishes *are* granted, they're all too liable to hew to the letter of the wish and not the spirit.

One Full Henderson

Ver0.3

2.0 Hendersons

The main story is irreparably busted.
The campaign ends.

The tale that follows is not from the timeline we know—but it might have been,
had the dice fallen differently...

Two Full Hendersons ver 0.3

2.0 Hendersons

The main story is irreparably busted. The campaign ends.

The austere room was in the middle of an old and magnificent castle. Recreated in imitation of the original de A Dyne castle, which had long since burned to the ground, inside was a new throne, a long scarlet rug, and two lines of officials all standing in a row. They were waiting in anticipation for the most important person to arrive.

Next to the throne itself was a methuselah noble with silver hair and bewitching heterochrome eyes of blue and green. She was waiting with a rescript affixed with an Imperial seal, a golden seal, and a newly crafted crown, all atop a plinth, her attitude entirely nonchalant.

Across from her was a dashing gentleman dressed in a priest's gorgeous white garb with yellow trimming customary of worshippers of the Sun God. In one hand he had an incense burner and in the other he clasped a holy scripture to his chest.

Behind the priest, almost as if she wished to hide behind his huge frame, was a priestess of the Night Goddess dressed in a black robe. Upon the tray in her hands were a holy seal and a silver ring. As she waited with closed eyes, she truly fit the image of her divine patron's emissary.

Finally, he arrived.

"His Majesty the high king has arrived!"

The baritone voice echoed through the hall as the grand doors, adorned with a flowing metal engraving, swung open. There stood a single man. He wasn't particularly tall—perhaps slightly shorter than the mensch of the western region—and his finely honed muscles

made him appear even smaller than he was. However, he projected an air of confidence all the same.

While his golden hair wrapped up in a crown—looking like a halo spun from sunlight—made him appear like a noble lady, his dignified stance, sharp eyes, and Absolute Charisma erased any traces of weakness one might feel. With each footfall on the carpet the officials on each side fell to their knees and bowed their heads. The man paid them no heed, as if this were the most normal thing, and made his way to the throne at the back of the room.

"On this blessed day I, Count Agrippina von Ubiorum, have come to offer congratulations on behalf of Emperor Martin Werner von Erstreich."

"I appreciate the kindness."

Immediately afterward, the man ignored a number of formalities, grabbed the crown on the plinth, and placed it on his own head!

Everyone in attendance gasped. Of course—this throne, crown, and independent autonomy hadn't been given; no, they had *claimed it back* by their own hands. They realized that this was the finest honor that their king, Erich de A Dyne, had won.

"Long live High King Erich!"

"May the high king's glory last forever!"

"We pledge our allegiance to the Unifier King!"

Applause like thunder roared through the room with rapturous cheers of praise. The man with his own heterochromia—one eye baby blue and the other ashen—received the clamor as if it were nothing and slumped onto his throne. With a haughty motion, he crossed one long leg over the other and listened to the cheers that never seemed to end.

These local lords—no, these *citizens* of the peripheries who had come together once again under their high king raised their cheer yet higher.

[Tips] The de A Dyne castle was destroyed during the occupation, but it was rebuilt by the College professor, the honorable Mika von Sponheim, in a show of fealty.

As I watched the local lords—sorry, now they were my loyal subjects—applaud me, all I could think was *how had it come to this*?

I knew on paper what had happened—I had grown tired of both the Empire's and the local lords' way of doing things and had aired out my grievances to Lady Agrippina. That had been the root cause.

"Both sides are ticking me off, so I kind of want to mess them all up a bit, you know?" I'd said.

"That sounds mightily fun," came her reply.

I had come to her to discuss things, but I'd had a few drinks and as such got a bit more *honest* about my feelings than I'd wholly intended. That was probably the point where my luck had truly run out. Didn't help that it was a *bonehead move*.

For some while now Lady Agrippina had been worried about the inevitable but not yet imminent backlash from Ende Erde, the Kingdom of Seine, and the other satellite states on account of the dramatic shift in the balance of power that her introduction of aeroships had invited. The margrave wasn't all too helpful, and the neighboring satellite states were about the same. Faced with so little help, she had been threading together numerous plans so that she could sort things out in one fell swoop.

Given that I was still good and pissed about the whole Sechstia debacle, I had been the perfect vessel for her scheme.

She had weaved an absolutely bonkers plan to unify the local lords of the area to reform their power dynamics while also absorbing the near-useless satellite states into one powerful buffer state. I had made a mistake; I didn't have any time to even so much as object as it was moved into action. Maybe I had been carried along by the alcohol. I had realized in the back of my head that there was no stopping the train once it had started moving, so I might as well get on.

As I gradually rushed around restoring peace to the western territory and keeping my second home safe, I had ended up with the role of high king thrust upon me.

I had really been through it.

Leveraging the failure of Project Ember, Lady Agrippina had exploited the College's internal politics to pilfer all of their results.

She had safely engineered Justus's witch eye to work with me and transformed one of my eyes into a Conqueror's Eye. Next, she had done a hefty amount of doctoring with some family trees and foisted me into the position where most Imperial nobles would acknowledge me as the true heir of de A Dyne.

The argument that the Empire had hidden the bloodline until now and the fact that I had a working witch eye had been convincing enough. The plan snowballed before very long, and pro-Imperial local lords and smarter folk who knew when to switch sides all became my supporters in no time at all.

Then I used the moderates, pacified the hardliners, crushed the radicals, cleaned up some foreign plots along the way, doing a whole range of work that I should've been praised for but only received even more work on top of that.

I had really been put through the wringer. While it was a pain to convince obstinate local lords, I also had to deal with the guilt I felt for tricking overjoyed old folk who cried as they held me, convinced that my eye was proof of my lineage to the high king. Then I had to go into war alongside my newly unified people to fight the radicals who wouldn't accept me. I crushed them and was then called the Little Conqueror of the West. "Little Conqueror" was the title given to the Emperor of Creation who had unified the river basin of the Rhine River, and although mine was only a local variant, it was still too heavy for my shoulders.

Then to top it off, I had received the title of Archduke Benelux and been appointed the duke of the newly formed Arlon Duchy.

But when I thought of the many tragedies that would have happened if I hadn't gone along with the plan, I began to doubt that *not* stepping up to the plate would really have been any better.

I was pretty certain that the Empire would have easily riled up the local lords, resulting in deaths of their allies and enemies alike. The Trialist Empire of Rhine had its whole "force your enemies into one big battle to wipe them out in one go" doctrine down pat, but the tens of thousands of deaths involved would inevitably hose the economy for a decade or two.

When it came to matters like these, the long-term perspective of

the methuselah emperor really shafted us mortal folk. Of course, he didn't *completely* look down on the common person who had to suffer for decades, but the logic that it would be good for future generations stung a little for those who had to actually live through the hard times. As a mortal myself, it would have been difficult to watch the chaos, violence, and deadly famines that would result during this "short transitionary period."

That was why I'd decided that I would accept a plan that would, in some people's eyes, sacrifice me. I had been drunk, yes, but not so monstrously drunk that it would have won out over my Heavy Drinker trait. It had been my choice.

I raised a hand to stop the raucous cheering, fearing it would go on for hours longer if I didn't stop them now and the room fell into pin-drop silence. Everyone was ready to hear what I had to say.

"As of today, I officially ascend to my role as Erich de A Dyne, duke of the new Arlon Duchy and Archduke Benelux. We are able to greet this day thanks to all you—my people—who have had to sleep with firewood for a pillow and borne up under a history of troubles."

Despite my young age of twenty-four, Absolute Charisma and Oozing Gravitas helped to deepen my voice. As it rang through the room, the older folk present, who had spent years eating cold and miserable meals as the strongarms of the region, started *crying*.

"Thus I promise you this. With our alliance with the Empire struck and this land ours once more, I will rule for an era of peace once again. All who live in this land are my family; all the wise folk who attend the folkmoots are my countrymen; *all* the people who make their homes here are my children. But to turn this land into a paradise that no one will ever trample upon again, I must ask you to lend me your help once more."

A monarch cannot always deal in soft words. Someone with power uses their guts to topple those around them, but that had been done, but now it was time for kindness.

Yes, dear reader? You wish to know how *I* toppled those around me?

I stood on the front lines of every battle. Not in some formation, no; I always walked ten paces ahead of a row of soldiers and

crushed everyone with my bottomless guts. At the end of the day, nobles were a species you could win over with sufficient mettle and generosity. I stepped up to the plate and put my life on the line. There were a lot of times where I thought I was going to die, but I still saw it through.

While I had become lauded as a king who didn't budge one inch on the battlefield, I still needed to act like a magnanimous monarch for my subordinates.

More cheers erupted at my announcement to build a happy and healthy country. After letting them have their joy for a moment, I raised a hand once more to continue.

"As proof of this oath, I shall change my name. While Erich, the name I received from my parents, is precious, it is pronounced in the Imperial tongue. As such, I will be using the old and traditional pronunciation of Eirikr."

"Incredible, Your Majesty! Your understanding of our traditions is wonderful!"

"His Majesty has given his implicit approval to use the old language! Praise Duke Erich... No, praise High King Eirikr!"

I had done some wasteful things along the way, though. Although Limelit had won me a hell of a lot of experience now that I was getting all this airplay as a king, I ended up pouring most of the rewards into skills for rulership, diplomacy, and cultural knowledge of the western territory. If I'd pumped that experience into sword skills, I would have been able to declare myself the finest swordsman in all the region.

"I believe we should learn from the ancient teachings. Thus—the next king may not be my own heir! I will hear out the folkmoot and create a sturdy position while my life permits it. You are all my kin, my allies, my friends! Any of you could one day ascend to the throne, and it would please me greatly."

But I didn't mind taking on hard work if it meant protecting my old home of Marsheim—which, strictly speaking, was now in the nation next door. My decisions that led here allowed me to sleep better at night when I considered the dirty plots that would have ensued without me, killing thousands or tens of thousands.

I doubted I'd ever get used to that "High King Eirikr" business, even after I died.

"We are no longer under the Empire's yoke! We stand shoulder to shoulder as allied nations. Many of you may have your own thoughts, but I beg for your magnanimity. I promise that I will do what I can to dispel ill will and bring about eternal prosperity. The return of my ancestor's head is proof of that!"

A raucous cheer erupted.

I snapped my fingers and my attendant brought a box out from the side of the throne. Inside was Justus de A Dyne's head—kept for ages in the Empire's secret vault but miraculously undecayed. I had said that this would be a necessary means to appease the extremists if I were to gain the throne, and thankfully Lady Agrippina had easily wrested it out of there for me.

With her help, I hadn't simply regained an old country; I had won back the honor that they had wanted for so long. It was a pretty good conclusion if you asked me.

Margrave Marsheim had lost some territory, yes, but at the same time he had managed to shed himself of land he never used and people who had secret intentions to turn traitor. With the founding of this buffer state who had promised to not turn on the Empire, the people could carry on with their lives unburdened by the dread of a war that could come around the corner at any moment.

In the end, my allies and I had ended up having the hardest time of it, given all of the backbreaking work we had done and still had in store. This wasn't a purchase I'd regret, was it...?

[Tips] The Arlon Duchy is a new nation formed out of the land of the old local lords and some satellite states that had history with them. It is a relatively small nation, amounting to the size of one of the Empire's administrative states.

Since its founding by High King Eirikr, it enjoyed a long era of prosperity as a center of commerce. Despite his indifference toward a royal bloodline, his descendants were always elected as the nation's leader.

A huge banquet had been held, with Imperial nobles—including Margrave Marsheim—and important members from the nearby satellite states in attendance. Now that it was winding down and people started to filter out to make their way home, I could finally relax.

What a day. I had to remember the faces and names of each person as they came in, as well as tell them how they'd helped me to show that I hadn't forgotten their kindness. As I had to think about the benefits I would give in the future, I figured I would have said something stupid if I hadn't invested in some diplomacy and political relations traits, as well as cranking up Memory to Scale IX: Divine Favor.

"Your Majesty, would you like a drink?"

"Quit that, Mika... I've finally shaken off all those people—talk to me like normal, or I'll end up stuck calling you Honorable Chief Magus each and every time!"

"All right, all right," my old friend said with a laugh before topping off my chalice with another round of wonderfully crisp water.

There were many who had decided to come with me in founding the duchy. The Fellowship had remained in Marsheim as an adventuring unit, but Yorgos and a number of others chose to follow me personally and still served as my personal guard brigade. I'd taken a ton of money from the Empire and put them on duty directly as a standing army. Mika was on temporary transfer here to help as an infrastructural adviser.

Those who had left me were Siegfried—who had said "Court service ain't my style"—and his wife Kaya, who were now leading adventurers. I was very fortunate that they still helped me along with the Fellowship when I needed it.

Oh yeah... Apparently that hero-hopeful was ready to set out on a big adventure; he had sourced some intel on where the legendary Windslaught was sleeping—I'd have to send him a hundred drachmae to commemorate the occasion.

Money was, for once, no longer a real concern for me. Given the sheer number of Imperial nobles whose fortunes depended somewhat on my appearing unscuffed, all I had to do was raise a

little fuss about a certain lightness in my purse of late and in the cash would pour. Before too long I'd be integrating some customs taxes; I'd use my internal admin experience (or at least my loose approximation) to make the duchy a place where money grew on trees.

And when Sieg found that legendary blade, I'd ask him to let me hold it.

The thing about being king was that you couldn't really go on adventures. I'd headed a corps in order to defeat a true dragon that had rocked up from gods-knew-where, but that was war games—it didn't feel like an adventure.

I couldn't wait until I could turn up a successor and retire from the public eye. If I could just retire in my thirties I could get back on the road with some get-up-and-go years still left in me.

"Oh yeah, how's Margit?"

"Retired to her chambers. Needed to prepare something, apparently."

That was right—while it might look like I'd had many happy tidings with the inauguration and all, the truth was that there was only one thing to really be happy about: Margit and I had finally settled down.

It had been a real pain in the behind until we'd managed it. I'd received so many invitations from the local lords to marry someone's daughter or accept someone as their concubine or what have you. I wasn't keen on starting a harem, so it had been a real ordeal. That didn't even touch on the headache I'd have if I'd made kids all over the place and the duchy devolved into a succession war. I copied the Empire and made inheritance and succession based on the firstborn, but that would merely contain any arguments within the family unit. I wanted to lay the groundwork for as little strife within the family as I could manage.

That wasn't to say I'd been perfect—I'd ended up doing *things* a few times courtesy of the other party's extreme pleading and the atmosphere, but they were due to Margit's own pranks that she played on me, so they don't count.

I found myself chuckling to myself. I'd make sure the wedding

was super lavish. I'd made her wait so long, so I was excited for what lay ahead.

As my betrothed and future queen, Margit had helped me so much, and so I wanted to really give back to her. Lady Agrippina had rejigged Margit's own family tree as well, recasting her as the youngest daughter from a highbrow family before the Ubiorums took her in.

"Your Majestyyy, why is the booze gone?"

"Brigade Commander Dietrich! Look around you!"

The commander of my personal guard gave a sigh and propped herself up on her arms. She looked around her with a flushed face and seemed confused.

"Huh? Where'd the people go?"

"Home. The party's over, you idiot."

I had made her the commander of my personal guard because many of the local lords, at their heart, were barbarians, and I thought they'd gel with someone as reckless as her. Plus, if you gave her enough booze and snacks, she would never stab you in the back, like what had happened to a certain Roman emperor. Being a former housecarl, she settled into her role quickly and proved a good leader for her subordinates. We had also realized Yorgos was really good with numbers, and so I'd put him in charge of admin. Things were working smooth as butter with our scary-looking accountant and our tough commander, so I was pleased as punch.

Well, one point of worry was the fact that she must have been spurred on by Margit, because she kept trying to slip into my bed.

"Tch... Guess I'll join the party my subordinates are throwing," she said.

"Don't be silly. Let them be. The rank and file won't be able to make merry with their superior there," I said.

Despite the nonsense she was spouting, I held her back and got her to stay by passing her a nearby bottle of liquor. Even though she had finally learned what good alcohol tasted like, she still had a taste for the cheap stuff. Trashy as always. I wondered if she'd ever learn how to hold herself back a bit more...

"All right, Mika, I think I'll be turning in."

“Me too, I think. I’ve got a discussion on infrastructure tomorrow, so it’s looking pretty busy.”

Mika grabbed the lapels of his fine outfit—designed by Lady Leizniz for today—and lazily tried to fan some air inside as he stepped down from the stage. He was in charge of designing the highway system that would cross the western territory. There weren’t enough hours in the day, really.

He mentioned that he’d like a reward when it was finished; I told him I would give him anything he asked for, but I wasn’t too sure what he’d ask me.

I felt more befuddled by the faces and names of the people I’d met today than the booze I’d swilled. With heavy steps, I dragged myself to bed.

“Well done on a hard day’s work,” Margit said.

“M-Margit... What are you...?”

She chuckled. “I thought this might please you.”

As I entered our gorgeous bedroom, a bewitching sight almost caused my heart to burst. Margit was waiting for me in a stunning outfit. She was wearing a slightly transparent black gauze cloak. I could see the tattoo of my family emblem—a wolf with a sword in its jaw—under her right clavicle. The fabric wrapped around her waist was made from the same material, but this had a number of gemstones dotted about. Worn in a way that simultaneously hid the join of her human and spider parts but also showed it off, it was incredibly sexy. I could just about see the butterfly and ivy tattoos on her lower back, along with the wolf and heart design around her navel. The sight was almost too much for me. What had grabbed my attention the most was a veil, again out of the same material. In the western territories, they had an old tradition where one’s spouse was the only one permitted to raise the veil. The material covered her cheeky smile, and I felt my curious urges welling up.

Margit was beautiful as she was, but what husband wouldn’t be happy to see his wife dressed up for him like this?

“You must be tired after all that drinking. You can go straight to sleep, if you like,” she said.

“Are you saying that just to tease me?” I replied.

I took her in my arms and decided to enjoy some quality time together to forget about my exhaustion.

[Tips] The Unifier King Eirikr was the first high king of the Arlon Duchy. His military and administrative fame were remembered for generations to come. His unifying policies were introduced to the Empire and became so standard that most students studied them in their school curriculum.

Even after his death, he was known as a wise monarch, a hero of a troubled age, and a good ruler in times of peace. Many were named after him in the hopes it would motivate them to model themselves after him.

In my mind, the only things that should occupy the desk of anyone over sixty should be letters and mementos from old friends, with their grandchild pawing at it all from atop their knee.

"Y-Yes, Father, but I believe the new commemorative aeroport should go here."

"If you ask me, Erich, shouldn't the dry dock be here? Here would be far more pertinent if we're thinking about elevation."

But *my* desk was dominated by a top secret map of Arlon, made with the latest technologies, around which sat my heir and a certain methuselah who'd taken up diplomacy during her "retirement." Why was this happening to me?

"But Lady Agrippina, I think it best to prioritize access for boats from the Mauser River. It would be a waste of mana to have the ship make so many stops to carry its full complement of soldiers! We finally managed to widen and canalize the river. Not using it would be like tossing away a perfectly ripe fig!"

"You think so? It might be the latest iteration, but these ships will need constant maintenance every two years. If you consider the checks required on the latest furnaces, I think it would be best to build further out. We can make the soldiers walk! Or they can use the splendid roads that have been so lovingly built."

"Hold on, you two," I said, finally chipping in. I held up my hand to stop the conversation and let out a cough after a moment of

silence. “Sascha, I appointed you as my successor a while ago now. I’m meant to be enjoying my retirement.”

My son—his full name was Alexander, and in a rather surprising turn, he had been born mensch (rarely how it went when the mother was an arachne)—looked at me as if I were mad.

“Have you forgotten, Father? You were the one who said a child should nibble at their parent’s shins while they can.”

I didn’t like how he threw my words back at me—I’d said as much to chide him for depending too much upon my funds.

“Don’t nibble at me like some old chicken bone! You’re meant to be a high king!”

“There’s no way I’m letting you have an easy retirement while you’re this full of beans, you piece of crap! Old chicken bone? Please! Your legs are thicker than an ox’s! The folkmoot is so damn annoying, always pestering me to ask for you! Stupid old man!”

“Stupid? Enough of your nerve, you little brat! You’re still as cheeky as you were when you were five. Tch, how about I scrape the dirt from your sister Isolde’s nails and sneak it into your glass? That’s what you deserve!”

Did my own blasted son not have any desire to let his poor old man have a bit of rest and relaxation?! I was an old man and I’d long since given him the throne! Do your damn job, boy!

“And you, Lady Agrippina. Please don’t bring topics to me; just go straight to Sascha, I beg you!”

“Huh? No way!” she replied. “At the end of the day, this boy always dashes off to say that he needs to ask for his father’s opinion. It makes sense that I’d want to have discussions go as efficiently as possible for my own... *Ahem*, in order to maximize the profit of the Empire.”

They were throwing me difficult curveballs... And what the hell was this talk about a new aeroport?! This was news to me! We had two military aeroports in Arlon already, and that was enough!

“But those aeroports are concessions from the Empire,” Sascha said. “Well, we *are* using the ships that are stationed there, but...”

“The Empire wishes to give you some prototype ships as a reward for quelling the northern revolts, so I’d like you to keep that in mind

in our discussions," Lady Agrippina said.

"Huh?! That's news to me!" I blurted.

Two years ago, the pirates of the arc peninsula teamed up with some bandits and attacked the northern isles. They had also attacked the Empire in order to set up their own sovereign authority. We helped to quell this uprising and were first to engage. In the end, we managed to fell the one they had appointed as their king and receive an order of the first class. The Emperor said that there would be a reward, but this was the first I was hearing of this!

"Our reward is prototype ships?!" I went on.

"The improved *Theresea*-classes still run well, but the Imperial Navy have been moaning about wanting smaller ships. We are working on an airborne destroyer that will be about a third the size."

The *Theresea*-class ships were still soaring across Imperial skies and proved useful in matters of diplomacy and military affairs, but due to their huge size and complicated design, it took a long time for them to get flying once more after they had landed. As a result, it was a bit late, but what remained of our competition had discovered our weakness—our ships were a bit crap for patrolling and scouting purposes.

With a limit to how many dragon knights could be on patrol, the Imperial Army—an organization that had once been almost deadweight but had transformed into every Imperial child's dream employer—had requested the development of a ship that could fill this gap.

The result was this new prototype: the destroyer. Whereas the *Theresea*-class ships could be used for foreign travel, this new class of ship had a stripped-down frame and could run on two smaller arcane furnaces, rather than the standard four full-sized furnaces. Their light size meant that although they could only fly half as far, they were a lot simpler to build. In the near future a few dozen ships were planned to be built, and they would bring local skies under Imperial control.

"Since when?!" I said.

"Yesterday."

"Yesterday?!"

I leaned forward in my chair to shout at Lady Agrippina to not talk about such top secret things all the way out here, but I heard my joints cracking in rebellion. *Ow, my poor back... Too much time spent doing desk work...*

"They were thinking about doing experiments and test flights here in Arlon," Lady Agrippina said. "As these are prototypes that won't be made in bulk and they're smaller, they came to an agreement in the meeting to consider naming them *Eirikr*-class ships. They thought that when the experiments and the like are done, they would make a fitting gift. What an honor to be the first satellite state to have its own air fleet!"

I wanted to sock her square in the mouth. She never changed...

"What are you thinking?! And named after *me*?! I'm still alive!"

"The Delicate Empress is still alive too, no?"

"Please don't compare me to a vampire!"

Aside from the *Theresea* proper—the lead ship and first of the *Theresea*-class aerial conquestships—ships in the Empire were never named after living people. It wasn't too much of a leap of the imagination to see that if they crashed or sank, it wouldn't be very auspicious. Was it some kind of joke that they wanted to use my name for these prototype ships when I was alive?! I was an old fogey who might not see tomorrow, and I'd long since given up my role as high king!

"Fine, how about *Alexander*-class, then?" I said.

"That won't compare to the glory of the Little Conqueror. Think about how damn hard your successor has to work, old man," Sasha replied.

"Work harder to overshadow that glory then, idiot boy!"

Despite his complaints, the truth was that most of what I did had been prepared and foisted upon me by people around me. *You often attend social gatherings in the Empire and know the ins and outs better than me. Surely you can do something with those connections?*

The expansion and canalization of the Mauser was a project that we had both developed, so it was hard to claim it as his, but I knew he was getting ready to run some experiments with the carriage

railways with Mika's students. He was far better than his father at internal admin—he should have made a show of that! Or wait, maybe he just wanted to use my name until I died to lighten his load!

Maybe I spoiled him too much as my only son. He was past thirty now... The future was worrying.

"You can sort that out with a little argument," Lady Agrippina said. "But with five ships in the works, I'd like to hurry up and decide where to build a nonconcession aeroport."

"Five ships?!"

"That will be enough for information gathering, won't it? And you'll have some to spare in case one crashes."

"Stop with that inauspicious stuff! I've decided that I won't die until I see my great-grandchildren!"

"Yes, I know, but without a decent name it'll be hard to get the funding..."

As my former master-slash-employer gave this awfully bureaucratic response, I forced down the urge to grab her by the lapel. Feel free to praise my restraint.

In the end, I ended up conceding after my foolish son brought out the cincher that I could use the prototype to take my grandchild on holiday somewhere. And so the new ships would be given their trial run here in Arlon, they would be called *Eirikr*-class ships, and I would become honorary admiral—in truth, just one more person to pass the buck to.

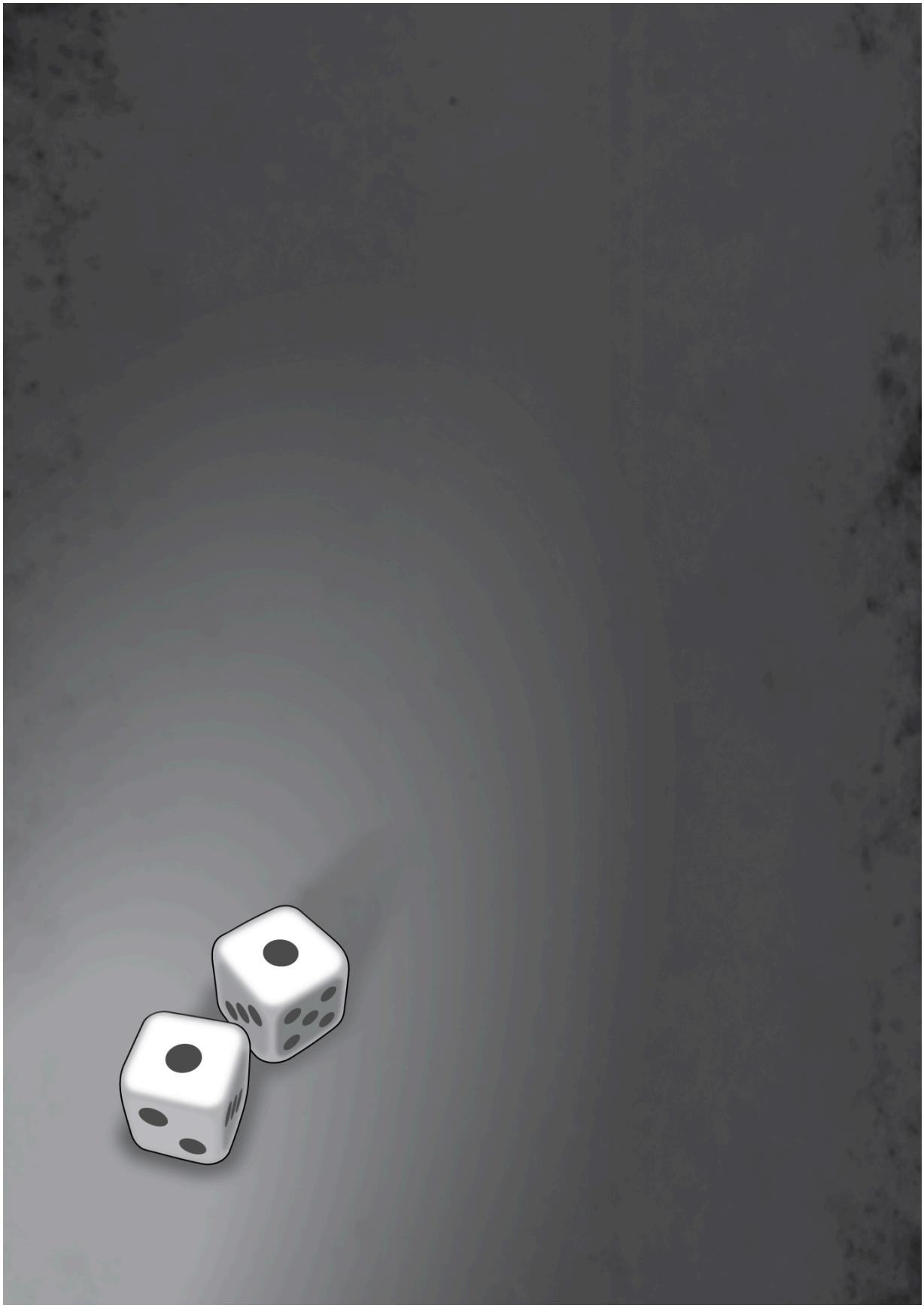
Where was my peaceful old age? Not this, surely...?

[Tips] The *Eirikr*-class destroyer ships were small ships born during the era of aeroship crafting to fill strategic niches that the huge conquestships necessarily could not.

They were primarily used for scouting, suppression of small city-states, quelling bandits, and delivering communiques. They were hugely useful, and thanks to the success of these first prototypes, the officially mass-produced models would go on to be known as the improved *Eirikr*-class. They would go on to protect Imperial skies for

years to come.





Afterword

Thank you to my grandmother—with the arrival of Obon every year, I pray you continue to rest in peace.

Thank you to my editor, who always gives exact words of advice and crushes all the bad bits out of my story to help make it something great. Thank you to Lansane, who never fails to create wonderful illustrations for my characters to my unique tastes. Thank you to Uchida Temo, who turns scenes that are difficult to show in the novel into a new dynamic and theatrical format. And thank you to all of you, my dear readers, without whom I wouldn't exist.

Now, how many Western-style sci-fi afterwords, so many that maybe you're all bored of them by now, does this make? At any rate, we have finally reached volume 10, a huge milestone into double digits. The celebratory air is kind of messed up by the fact that this is the twelfth book in the series, but it is honestly thanks to you, my readers, that my first published work has made it this far.

Because the series has made it all this way there have been some wonderful bonuses, and now, for the limited edition of volume 10, we have a special binder you can put them all in! It's an incredible thing, with the female characters of the series designed by Lansane! If you have your record sheets on slightly smaller paper, then it will be a perfect size for them too. I'm looking forward to receiving a finished version from the production team.

Now then, what to do. My bad habits cropped up once again and this volume ended up being hugely long, but thanks to some overzealous editing I've ended up with quite the space for the afterword. I'm just a regular guy, the sort of dime-a-dozen person you can see in any old crowd, and I'm only thinking about how to live my days peacefully, so I don't have any interesting anecdotes. I'm the sort of person who doesn't need any super thrilling joys and in return won't have any deep despair. I want my heart to be like a

plant and live a peaceful life—that's my dream.

You might all laugh if I tell you that when I was younger I wanted to be a monk and achieve enlightenment, so I won't go into detail about that now. Instead I read a lot of entertaining novels and ended up being someone who writes stories—a far cry from Siddartha.

Looking back at it now, my memory is terrible, so I think I was better suited to writing than trying to remember difficult sutras. As long as Japan and the National Diet Library where my books are continue to exist, then they too should also continue to exist; I think I found a way of life that's suited to me.

To return to the topic at hand, this volume wasn't too difficult to write. I didn't have to change the story too much and I didn't have much trouble with the reasonable—yes, reasonable for me—amount of extra content, and so it was a process that was far more amenable than my usual tendency to break deadlines. Well, given the fact that the deadline was near the busy Obon period and I was struggling with some health issues, I still feel like I'm always stressing out.

Just once I'd like to finish everything one week before the deadline and twiddle my thumbs as I wait for it to come. I know that it's *my* fault that it's not been this way, but still.

Putting that aside, we really have come a long way. Volume 10 is usually a huge milestone for other series: in a certain VRMMO they finally get thrown into another world, in a certain academy city they have their sports festival, in a certain fleet where all doctrines have been destroyed they'll finally go to Earth (although these are all from other publishers, sorry).

With that in mind, I'm walking at a real ox's pace. I have so much stuff I want to write, and I end up throwing this or that into the plot, and with enough sweet-talking to my editor I have managed to write all that I want. But to think that we'd only move *one* season in a whole volume...

Erich has gone from age five to age eighteen in twelve books—talk about a leisurely pace. Over the past half year I have been dealing with the question of whether I should be more conscious of

a slightly speedier pace or a more lively one.

Saying all that, I am aware that, like before, my readers have probably read this and been thinking that the story this time was unfamiliar.

But I am getting better! Unlike the ridiculous episode with volume 9 where I wrote Canto I and II with all-new content, this time I have actually used content from the web novel. A whole twenty-five percent. To me, it really is a Naro novel—as in I managed to transfer the content as is from that site.

Wrapping up what happened in this next volume without spoilers—well, I doubt that there are many unique readers who start from the afterword—but in the web novel, Siegfried was asked to do a "fake" bodyguard job and he ends up knocking out the noble-looking princess inside to avoid the scenario. I reworked this ridiculous episode into what you read in this novel.

My keen-eyed web novel readers might have noticed this already, but in turning the story into a published book, I wanted my readers to feel like it was worth it after spending their money on it. It wasn't as if I was laying the groundwork down since the web novel.

I'd rifled through my drafts wondering if I needed to write a new plot for volume 10 or if I had something I could use and ended up realizing that that little throwaway part could be developed into a bigger plot point.

In short, everything was thanks to chance. I don't remember what I'd been thinking when I was writing the web novel; it was so long ago now—*four* years ago?! Seriously?—so I don't write with the anticipation that I might be able to plump up the story for the published version. All the same, that little bit that I'd just written on a whim was like bread; it just needed some time in the oven to turn into the volume you have before you. I think it rose pretty well.

When it came to working on the published volumes, I'd wondered if we'd be able to make it to the point where grown-up Mika is reintroduced. In the web novel I'd been so flustered trying to get the female characters from the Berylin part of the story back together that I'd kind of sped through the story, so I decided that I would do Mika's reintroduction properly. After writing so much of what I've

wanted to, I hope that my readers of the novel version are happy to see them finally return to the story.

I have such a fondness for Mika that I've ended up overloading them in terms of idiosyncrasies, but it was really fun to write. Well, this story's female characters are all unique in their own ways, of course.

Mika's a beautiful individual whose shifts between sexes highlight all the variable textures of their friendship with Erich, managing to land square in two of a certain someone's strike zones all in one package, so it's been really fun to have them in the story again.

Of course, Mika's position as Erich's friend is the most important thing, but I'm a bit concerned how the two will interact when Mika's sex changes. I hope I can do this justice in the coming volumes.

I received a lot of useful feedback from everyone that the next part of the story dragged on a little. I really need to rework the flavorings a bit more or I'll fall flat on my face, so I'm going to really put my all into this. It will also be a test to see how much my writing skills have improved since then, so I hope you look forward to it.

I thought I wrote quite a bit for this afterword, but apparently I still have my available space. I've run out of interesting things to talk about.

Then I'll have to talk about TRPGs. Yes, time to return to my old ways. With the development of online sessions and various new tools, I have been able to enjoy the luxury of playing TRPG sessions from my own home, but there is something even more *luxurious* to it now.

I've managed to be at a table where all the members, GM and players alike, are writers. We have currently been enjoying playing as ninjas; on the team are Shori Kiwadoi, who debuted around the same time as me (*What a Fun Job It Is to Be Paid by the Woman Next Door—Who Has No Joy in Life Despite Earning 500,000 Yen a Month—300,000 Yen to Say "Welcome home!"*) and Mitizou, who debuted later (*Virgin Knight: I Became the Frontier Lord in a World Ruled by Women*), both from OVERLAP, Inc., as well as writers from other publishers. We have endlessly enjoyed screaming in surprise and excitement at the table. It's the springtime of my life.

Although the medium may change, my luck is still the same. When I was a player, I built a PC who would be more likely to get crits than not, but then would spend five whole turns without a single critical hit—and two hits even missed—and then when I was Ninja Master I got a critical hit once per story arc and ended up almost killing the PCs. I truly am cursed with awful luck.

With this terrible luck, my expected value for a 2D6 roll is 5, and my opinion is that no matter how many fixed values you stack up, you can never trust the dice. When it comes to a system *without* fixed values, though, I end up getting nerfed. What am I meant to do then? I'd spent so much time reading all the data sheets and working to get a great result, but without the dice's favor I end up being somewhere between a meat shield and bulletproof.

Anyway, it's thanks to TRPGs that my real life is fulfilled, and I always look forward to the days when I can get together at the table.

Thanks to that, every day passes by so quickly. This volume is scheduled to be published on September 25th—at the time of writing, it's the end of August—and I can't believe summer's almost over. This year I only could hear the cicadas for a short period early in the morning, and I'd only had sparse encounters with mosquitoes; I didn't really feel like it was summer aside from the melting heat and the humidity. Now that I think about it, I didn't eat any watermelons or any other summer staples. I didn't go on vacation or go on trips with my friends, so I have a few regrets for the summer.

But let's use the logic that time passing more quickly means that the next volume will come a lot quicker too. Although I will have a lot to struggle with knocking my overlong and overly quirky prose into shape, I can only hope that this volume reaches your hands without issue and that the series will continue.

It seems like I've almost made it to the end of my long afterword. Okay, it's time for you all to line up as ever and get your record sheets for the GM to sign. It's the GM's joy to sign well-loved record sheets and prepare for the next session. I would like to close this afterword with my heartfelt thanks for your continued support.

[Tips] The author uploads side stories and world-building details to @Schuld3157 on Twitter (which he refuses to call by the pretentious name "X") as "extra replays" and "rulebook fragments."


Noble Lady Ferlin
(a memory that doesn't exist)


Henderson Scale
The "Henderson" referenced in the subtitle is Old Man Henderson, a Western tabletop legend.
Famed for overcoming a blood-thirsty GM to miraculously tie up the story he appears in, he has since become a measuring stick for how derailed a campaign can get.
Author
Schuld
Illustrator
Lansane
Min-Maxing My TRPG Build in Another World
Preach the Good Word of Mr. Henderson
10


Dietrich
"Over here, old chum! I have someone to introduce you to."
Erich
"You have it tough too, Prof."
"What ever could you mean?"
Margit
Mika


"Ah, yeah,
this ain't good."
"Dee is
so cute when
he's jealous..."
Kaya


"Th-They're coming to rescue me, aren't they? So why— Eep!"
Ferlin
Siegfried made a quick projection of where the explosion had happened.
"Man, that one was pretty damn close..."

CHARACTER

Name

Sechstia

Race

Mensch

Position

Enemy

Specialties

Mana Output VIII

Skills

- Etiquette

Traits

- Child of Project Ember
- Eye of the Conqueror (Replicated)
- Counterfeit Past











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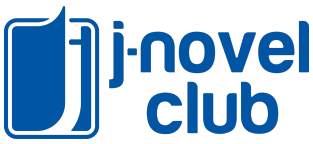
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by Schuld

Translated by Arthur Miura Edited by Will Holcomb

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