
Wanta
Illustrator: Yunagi
2
Survival Strategies of a Corrupt Aristocrat

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Survival Strategies of a Corrupt Aristocrat

Survival Strategies of a Corrupt Aristocrat: Volume 2 [Complete]

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Prologue: The Necessity of Training

A month had passed since the hero—Seravimia—had left the Girard territory. However, the peace of my domain would probably be only temporary. After all, Seravimia, the hero called the Grim Reaper in *Survival Strategies of a Corrupt Aristocrat*, was still targeting me. I didn't think she would make another direct attack, but to create her so-called perfect world, she would likely employ other tactics against me. She could use her status as the hero to incite other nobles to bother me, for instance.

However, the hero wasn't my only worry. The culprit who had captured and given the lesser earth dragon to the lizardmen, and their objective, was still unknown. It could have been an attempt on my life or to lay waste to my territory, but it could also be something completely different. I had to keep a flexible mind and avoid assuming the wrong hypothesis.

Around the middle of the game, other nobles started to invade. Based on the royal calendar we were still at the beginning, though, so I didn't have to be concerned about it for now. Still, considering how I acted differently from the original Jack, it was also possible that events could happen at a different time, so I couldn't completely rely on my game knowledge.

Between the fear of betrayal from insiders such as Lumié and Kevin and attacks from the outside, *Survival Strategies of a Corrupt Aristocrat* truly was an absurdly difficult game. Its creator, Seravimia, likely wouldn't have a pretty death. Considering that she'd made my life incredibly troublesome, I could guarantee it.

"I need money and power," I said and stopped focusing on my paperwork in my office. I couldn't concentrate on deskwork while thinking about my various enemies.

I threw my pen on my desk and exited the room, heading outside. On the way, I ran into Kevin.

"Where are you going?" he asked, which I translated into "What are you

doing, slacking off from work?” in my head. Truly an unpleasant old man.

As if I’d be carefree enough to play around when I’m being targeted by Seravimia and an unknown enemy, I complained in my mind.

“I’ve finished all the urgent work already, so I’m going to the courtyard to train.”

While I did need to develop my territory, as well as bolster my forces and improve their strength, it was all based on the assumption that I was alive. And if I couldn’t rely on my servants, then I had to improve my own combat ability. I wanted enough power to be able to survive even if Kevin and Lumié betrayed me tomorrow.

“You are going to train with her *again...*?” he said, somewhat exasperatedly, but I didn’t care. I didn’t bother with other people’s opinions and just followed the path I believed in.

“My fight with the lesser earth dragon made it obvious that I wasn’t strong enough. I have to prepare myself for what comes next.”

“Usually, one would train their soldiers so that their lord does not have to fight himself.”

“A fair argument, but not always true.”

Basically, having ten times more soldiers than the enemy would guarantee victory, but I wouldn’t be so bothered if I could actually do that. Reality was lacking in many ways. Between my almost bankrupt territory with its heavy taxes and the lure of more palatable neighboring domains, it was impossible to assemble a large number of soldiers.

“We don’t have the money to employ and keep a lot of soldiers, nor do we have the time to train them. Or was your point that we should be defenseless for the next few years until we can make the necessary preparations? Or maybe that I should take money away from rich merchants? True, we would get more soldiers, but at the price of the merchants’ enmity. And we both know that they are a bunch who never forget a grudge.”

Creating new enemies to increase your military might was the height of stupidity. Anyway, my explanation should be sufficient and Kevin should stop

complaining now.

“Right now, the best course of action is for me to get stronger. Got it?”

“It is as you say, Master Jack. I was wrong.” He bowed, admitting his mistake.

However, I didn’t take his words at face value. After all, he had lied about my father. I didn’t know what his objective was, but it was quite possible that these differences in opinion would lead directly to our split in the future.

“As long as you understand,” I replied, and I left without waiting for his answer.

Finally arriving at the courtyard, I found Adele sitting on the ground, her legs spread to her sides as she stretched her body. The moment she saw me she smiled happily, wagging her dog tail.

“Are you here to train?” she asked.

“Of course.”

“You sure like to train, Master Jack. Then I will help you!”

There was no way I could say no and practice alone after seeing such a pure, childish smile.

I guess today won’t be solo training, but combat practice, then.

I grabbed a wooden sword that was lying on the ground. As I was planning to give my Twin Hydra Blades to Adele in the future, I’d been practicing with a single sword recently.

“Well then, Master, how about a practice match with me?”

“With pleasure!” Adele bounced so high as she stood up that you’d think her feet had turned into springs. As a dual wielder, she had a wooden sword in each hand.

“Here I come!” I shouted.

Because it was training, I didn’t use magic to make a surprise attack and instead ran straight toward her, swinging my blade. However, she easily parried it with one sword and swung the other down toward my head.

I hadn’t used my full strength for my attack, so I was still keeping my body

balanced and easily dodged by stepping back. Then I followed up by pivoting on my right leg and striking horizontally, aiming at her side. And yet, she avoided it by jumping and landing on my sword on her tiptoes.

“Seriously...?” I was frozen in place, dumbfounded by her acrobatic move.

“You are wide open,” she said with a smile while swinging her wooden swords.

I collapsed on my back, my shoulders aching. I wondered if I wasn’t able to deal with her unexpected move because I wasn’t experienced enough. If I wanted to be able to counter surprise attacks, I had to get used to reacting faster in an emergency as soon as possible.

I need more combat experience. Maybe I should go outside and fight some monsters. That was my last thought before I lost consciousness.

* * *

“Master Jack!”

I woke up to Adele’s voice—I had apparently fainted for a few seconds. My shoulders still hurt, and I couldn’t move my body. I probably wouldn’t be able to stand before resting a little.

As I was looking at the blue sky, waiting for the pain to subside, Adele’s face entered my sight.

“Are you all right?” she asked, her tone dripping with the concern that she might have injured me. Looking at her drooping dog ears made me feel bad for her.

“You didn’t break any bones or anything. I just need to rest a little.”

The breeze cooled my hot body. It felt good, so I closed my eyes to enjoy the sensation, but then I felt something on my chest. From the sniffing noises, I guessed it was Adele’s head.

Still checking my scent? Don’t I reek of sweat?

Curious, I opened my eyes slightly and saw her tail swinging happily. She really had a strange fetish. However, it was precisely these sorts of differences from the game that made me appreciate how much she had changed since our

initial encounter. Same for Lumié and Ludwig. Their characters, and the ways they thought, were changing and growing.

“Stopping soon?” I asked, only to find Adele looking at me in despair. Her swaying tail fell powerlessly to the ground and tears formed in her eyes. I was starting to feel guilty for denying her pleasure.

That’s so unfair. How can I say no to that?

“Am I...bothering you?”

“...No, just do as you like.”

*Well, if she likes my scent that much, I guess I don’t need to worry about her betraying m*e—was what I forced myself to think to give her permission to continue. And, just to be clear, I wasn’t spoiling her!

As Adele continued to sniff me, I heard someone’s footsteps and moved my neck to see who it was.

The answer was Kevin. “I am sorry to impose on you while you are enjoying yourself.”

Still as sarcastic as ever. The way he acted as if our earlier conversation before my training didn’t happen was irritating.

“If I look like I’m enjoying myself to you, then you should have your eyes checked,” I retorted, but Kevin didn’t mind. In fact, he outright ignored me and held out a parchment.



I rolled to the side to take it and read its contents. It was about the investigation of the sewers of the only town in the Girard territory. The citizens had petitioned me about some kind of rotten smell, and its source had been discovered. As expected, it was the same reason as the original side quest in *Survival Strategies of a Corrupt Aristocrat.* Goblins who had taken residence in the sewers were killing all the small animals inside, and their rotting corpses were the cause of the odor. If nothing was done, it would spread illness in town. Moreover, there should be around fifty goblins, so if they got out it would lead to huge damage. I had to deal with them quickly.

"Did you find their nest?" I asked.

"Yes. I had adventurers search for it."

Plain jobs like that took a while, so adventurers were quite useful, as you could hire them for cheap. And if the guild had accepted the report, that meant we could trust it.

"Should I put a request to the guild to subjugate the goblins?" Kevin proposed. Usually, it was the right thing to do, but I found it to be a waste in this case. After all, it was a great opportunity to acquire more combat experience.

"No, I'll lead the soldiers and do it myself," I declared. This practice match had made it painfully obvious how much I was lacking in fighting experience. I needed to keep an attitude where I would fight if I had the opportunity.

What's more, Gwynt—the scout ally from the game—was in the sewers. In the game, he could prevent surprise attacks from monsters, and once strengthened, he could even be used for counterespionage. Basically, he was a key character when it came to defense. So if I wanted to make him my comrade, I had to go to the sewers.

"As you wish." I had explained my lack of combat experience to Kevin earlier, so he didn't complain and bowed his head.

"I'll take Adele, Ludwig, and around ten soldiers with me."

"I shall prepare portable rations, then," he said and left the courtyard, entering the mansion. He was likely going to order Lumié to make the

preparations.

“You heard us, Adele?”

“Huh? Ah, yes!” She had been so entranced in my scent that she hadn’t listened. I couldn’t help but worry a little about her attitude.

“We’re going to the sewers in two days. Talk with Ludwig to choose around ten soldiers to take with us.”

“Understood!” She reluctantly separated herself from my chest and also entered the mansion.

Chapter 1: Fiancée

As I was doing some paperwork in my office before tackling the sewer investigation, Kevin entered with a bundle of booklets, which was probably more work. Damn him! He'd just given me a whole pack of damage reports from the monster attack on Fourth Village not even an hour ago. I'd ordered him to send adventurers to the village, but new problems kept cropping up. I was starting to get annoyed.

"What is it this time?" I asked.

"Candidates to become your fiancée."

...Ah, yeah, that was a thing.

I'd been swamped with so many problems that I'd forgotten about the fact that Jack had a fiancée. Or, to be exact, there was an event at the beginning of the game to choose a fiancée. Before I knew it, we already had reached the point in time when it would happen. However, contrary to the game where my parents—who were now in an eternal sleep—were the ones to decide, now I could make my own choice.

I wasn't too enthusiastic about it, but I opened one of the booklets Kevin had put on my desk. They were filled with drawings of women who wished to marry me.

"They are all daughters of barons or knights. If you could choose a few, I shall take care of contacting them."

Well, not that a lot of women wanted to marry a rural baron, even more so considering the notoriety of House Girard. That meant that they all had some problems themselves. For example, the first page featured a woman past forty, and the annex with her information explained that she was quite wasteful. Well, in the first place, she wasn't an option considering her age.

On the next page was an enormous woman that seemed to weigh more than a hundred kilograms. I didn't have that kind of fetish, nor did I even want her near me, so that was a hard pass too.

Other than that there was a woman who liked to torment maids, one that was prone to having affairs, and so on and so forth. They all had a flaw or two I couldn't condone.

And even when I thought I had found decent ones, they were daughters of houses full of debts or with even more notoriety than House Girard.

Moreover, the worst thing was that I couldn't find any candidate that had been in the game. Apparently, my deviations from the game also affected things like this. Or maybe it was because of Seravimia? Well, I didn't know the truth, but it wasn't like there had been a particular woman I'd wanted to make my ally, so it didn't matter.

"Anyone you think would be good?" I asked him. My head was starting to hurt from the fact that not only was my territory full of problems, but my fiancée candidates were too. I stopped thinking and just left it to Kevin.

"Hmm... How about this one?"

The one he pointed to was fifteen years old, meaning she was old enough for me to marry her immediately. She was from a barony, so her status was good. Wondering what her flaw was, I checked Kevin's notes and found that she had been kidnapped once and it wasn't certain that she had kept her purity. There didn't seem to be anything else.

"Doesn't seem bad... Hmm?" I wasn't bothered by that problem so I'd thought she was fine, but then I noticed something at the end. "She's in a relationship with one of her vassals, huh?"

In noble society, as long as women birthed an heir, infidelity was tolerated, but I hated that kind of betrayal. Like hell I'd marry a woman who was almost certain to have an affair. If we met for a marriage interview, I'd kill her immediately.

Damn it, choosing a fiancée was starting to become a real pain. I was just wasting time anyway, so maybe I should just not marry anyone at all.

"Say, can't I just adopt someone and stay single?"

"Only if you do not mind House Girard's reputation falling even further."

“Yeah, of course that would happen...”

If you didn’t marry and instead adopted, people would think you didn’t accomplish your duty as an aristocrat—not that I understood that way of thinking—and the adopted child would be looked down on and bullied by other nobles. Basically, it was difficult to stay single when you were a noble. I’d need an excuse, such as finding a bride but remaining unable to conceive an heir, to be able to use this method.

“So no other option but to choose one from among them,” I sighed.

Going with Kevin’s recommendation kinda annoyed me, so I ignored her and continued to turn the pages. I was searching seriously, but they all were just so full of problems that I couldn’t choose any of them. I was on the second half of the third booklet and still hadn’t found anyone. Wasn’t that strange? I was on the verge of thinking that no decent woman existed in this world. In the end, I’d reached the final page without finding anyone.

“Oh? This one is...” I muttered.

She was eighteen, which was a little old—though that would have been too early to marry in my previous life—but that wasn’t a problem. She was from a knight house, though it was only single-generation and not hereditary. She barely passed as a noble, but that would be enough to be the first wife of a rural baron. I figured that her father’s objective was likely to become a true hereditary aristocrat, even if it meant giving his daughter to the infamous House Girard.

She didn’t appear in the game, so I wanted to know more about her and checked Kevin’s notes to learn about her flaws. Apparently, she was quite strong-minded and not well-liked by other noble daughters. In *Survival Strategies of a Corrupt Aristocrat*’s noble society, women had to show respect and take a back seat to their husbands, so being strong-willed was a serious downside. She liked swordsmanship more than embroidery, dance, or etiquette. In fact, she had quite a lot of combat experience and had apparently started to fight monsters when she was twelve. That would have been a roadblock for marrying a baron on its own, but a year ago, she’d been sliced by an ogre—a big humanoid monster that eats people—from her nape to her

chest. Such a huge scar, very visible when wearing a dress, earned her the disdain of other women, and men didn't even see her as someone from the opposite sex. That was why she still hadn't found a fiancé, and her family was getting impatient.

Well, I personally didn't care about it. A scar or two wasn't a problem. The most important thing was her personality.

"Let's go with that one. Contact her family."

Truthfully, I didn't have a good impression of marriage, so I didn't want to marry at all, but I could at least meet her. Worst case, we could just live separately even after tying the knot. That way, I wouldn't have any children and House Girard would end. As long as I could live in luxury, I didn't care about my succession and what would happen after my death. While I needed to be careful about betrayal, this was starting to sound like a good plan.

That night, I was sitting atop my bed, reading my game notes. Gwynt, the scout ally, was being held prisoner by a group of thieves who had taken residence in a part of the sewers. Unlike Adele, he wasn't facing imminent death, but I couldn't be sure how long he would stay alive. Well, I was ahead of the game, so he should still be fine.

The thief group was made up of second and third sons of farmers who had fled from their homes because of the heavy taxes. They were small fry who made money by looting empty houses and coercing travelers. Basically, leaving them alone would threaten the peace of the town, but catching them didn't earn me anything, which was why I hadn't bothered to deal with them—until now, that is.

"The thing is: will I be able to make Gwynt my comrade?"

Even after saving him and earning his trust, you still needed to solve his problem to get him to join you. However, his problem was, well, *the* problem. In the game, it was decided at random between thirty different possibilities. The worst one took around a year to solve, so if it happened to be that one, I would need to find another solution.

"Master Jack," called a voice, and I heard a knock at the door. I immediately

recognized it as Lumié.

“Come in,” I said after hiding my notes under the covers of my bed.

“Excuse me.” She opened the door and entered. Her expression looked stiffer than usual.

“What do you want?”

“...I heard about the matter of your betrothal.”

Come to think of it, there was a route in the game where Lumié could become Jack’s concubine. Maybe she was wondering if I would take a concubine or not after marriage.

“Why now, when the domain is still full of problems?”

“Because Kevin is being a pain.”

The betrayal of my wife in my previous life made me really not want to marry again. Unfortunately, it was my duty as an aristocrat to produce an heir, and people would find it disagreeable if my partner wasn’t of noble status. With the possibility of Kevin betraying me in mind, I had no other choice but to go along with it.

“I see. Kevin has certainly been keen on quickly finding a wife for you as of late.”

He doesn’t have to put so much effort into it... As I wanted to stay single, Kevin’s efforts were quite annoying.

“It’s going to be a loveless political marriage anyway. Once we have a child, we’ll live separately.” I couldn’t discuss adoption publicly, so I made a show of pretending that I was willing to have a kid. Though in truth, I intended for us to live separately as soon as we got married. Heck, we wouldn’t even eat together. I didn’t expect anything from my future spouse, and I wasn’t going to change the way I lived just because I’d gotten a fiancée.

“You are quite thorough. Do you hate the idea of marriage that much?”

She was being rather persistent. Was that the influence of the concubine route? It would be a pain if she tried to make a move on me, so I decided to make my answer clear.

“I hate the notion—it only invites trouble. I just want to live for myself.”

My life of luxury was mine and mine alone. That was why I hadn’t been moved by the idea of creating a perfect world with Seravimia.

“That part is still the same,” she muttered, smiling for some reason. Shouldn’t she be lowering her opinion of me for being selfish?

“Are you done? I want to sleep.”

“Thank you for answering my questions.” She bowed.

Apparently that conversation was her only business. A commoner and a noble wouldn’t normally have such a talk, but Lumié had been with me since my childhood, so I could allow it.

After she left my room, I turned off the light near my pillow and went to sleep.

* * *

I thought about Master Jack as I walked alone in the dim corridor.

I felt like he had changed a lot since the visit of the hero, Lady Seravimia—even more so than he had after waking up from the poisoning attempt. He trained more intensely with Adele, getting new bruises every day, and he was even more serious about dealing with the problems of the domain. He took care of them swiftly, and now the Girard territory had become a surprisingly comfortable place to live. He had been particularly strict toward the officials committing fraud, and starting with the tax collector’s execution in Third Village, he had been punishing people who had committed embezzlement, thievery, sexual crimes, and such one after another. Because of how extreme he was, people were divided between thinking that he was a righteous lord, intolerant of injustice, and thinking that he was an inflexible murderer.

Of course, I was of the former opinion. Kevin was too.

“But there’s still a part of him that hasn’t changed.”

“Living only for himself” was something he had always said. Even if he had changed on the surface, inside he still was the Master Jack I knew. I’d been worried that he had become someone else, but seeing him like this—trying to

do everything by himself—had reassured me, even though I thought it was wrong to feel like that.

While he was a womanizer, his true nature was that of a lone wolf. Even getting betrothed wouldn't change that.

That was why I had to be kind to him. After all, if I was the only person he could trust and depend on from the bottom of his heart, I would be able to have him make arrangements for Ludwig's safety.

Chapter 2: Side Quest: Cleaning the Sewers

I slept well and woke up in a good mood.

Adele was the one to help me dress today, though she wasn't used to it. Not only was she teaching me swordsmanship, but she had also started to learn the basic tasks of a maid to be able to stay by my side and always protect me. The reason? Seravimia, of course.

"We're weak, and even together we couldn't win against Seravimia," I said to Adele. She was behind me, helping me put on my jacket, as Lumié was watching from a little ways away to point out any mistakes.

I'd known from the start that there would be an overwhelming difference in strength. I couldn't imagine us winning no matter how many times we tried. Maybe she had come to this world before me and had been training efficiently for a long time. Such thoughts made me even more wary of her.

A normal person would likely give up and obediently submit to Seravimia. But not me. I'd never do that. The Girard territory was mine, and I would utterly destroy anyone who tried to take it from me.

"But we can get stronger. If we train like crazy, I'm certain we can turn the tables."

We'd draw closer to Seravimia's power through defeating monsters and our enemies. And if that wasn't enough, I just needed to get more allies: people that weren't going to betray me, obviously. As absurd as it was, Seravimia had given me plenty of time to prepare, and I was going to teach her that her composure was going to be her downfall.

"Of course. I do not wish to be a burden to you again, Master Jack. We will definitely win next time!" Adele declared vigorously, her voice filled with determination.

Because she had been taken hostage during our fight against Seravimia, her resolve was even firmer than mine. The chances of her betraying me were low to begin with, but the possibility had become even more faint. Hell, I'd be

willing to *thank* Seravimia for that.

“Yeah, definitely,” I agreed.

On the side, I could see Lumié looking anxious because of our dangerous topic. That was, of course, all part of my plan. I wanted to know how she—and the other people in the mansion—would act when knowing risky information. Adele, who was currently a maid-in-training, wouldn’t accompany me to the sewers and would instead observe the mansion for anyone who acted suspiciously during my absence.

Once dressed, I put on my equipment—a breastplate, gauntlets, and boots made of mithril—and hung my Twin Hydra Blades at my hips. Finally, I wore a mantle adorned with my family crest: a coiling snake.

“Let’s go,” I said and left my bedroom through the door that Lumié opened.

I walked through the corridors until reaching the entranceway on the first floor. There, ten soldiers were waiting for me. They were the ones who would participate in the exploration of the sewers with me. And they were led by Ludwig, the captain of my private army.

“We are ready to go!” Ludwig shouted, and they all saluted, each soldier smacking a hand to their chest. They were perfectly coordinated. It was hard to think they had been slacking on their training until recently. I figured that overcoming the fight in Third Village had made them realize that they were the ones who were protecting the people, and it motivated them.

“You guys know the objective of our outing, right?”

“Of course!” Ludwig replied as everyone’s representative.

“Then say it.”

“We must eliminate the goblins who have taken residence in the sewers! They number around fifty, and we will continue to explore the sewers until we kill them all!”

“Good. I see that you understand the plan well.”

There was the group of thieves too, but they were still undiscovered at this point, so I didn’t mention them. I was planning to find and deal with them on-

site personally to earn Gwynt's trust. He wasn't a strong character like the Verdant Wind sisters were, so I didn't think Seravimia had gotten him. In case she did, I would have to change my plans.

"Thank you very much!" Ludwig shouted, happy I had praised him.

I nodded and looked at each soldier one by one. "You guys are the soldiers protecting the Girard territory. I'll only permit you to die once you've slain your enemy. Got it?"

"Yes, sir!" they answered in unison.

Having such submissive soldiers made me feel so good that I couldn't help but smile. "Then off we go! After me!"

We exited the mansion, and I was the only one to board a carriage while the rest were walking. We pushed onto the garden and went through the iron gates, going into the town. After a while, we reached the outskirts, where the entrance to the sewers could be found. If this were Japan we could just have gone through a manhole, but here we could only enter through a tunnel.

Ludwig and the soldiers started to make preparations for the expedition, installing a tent to create a base of operations. Everyone wore a cloth on their faces to cover their noses and mouths, and hung magic stone lanterns at their waists. Then, once they were done preparing waterskins, portable rations, and fifth-rank potions for bruises, Ludwig came to me.

"Everything is ready, Master Girard. Shall we enter?"

"Yeah, let's go."

Hearing my words, the soldiers formed a line with Lugwig and me at the center. That way, they could protect me from the front and rear.

Finally, the time to start the side quest had come.

With this, I'll get a new ally and make myself stronger at the same time, putting me one step closer to my life of luxury!

The sewers were putrid. The rotten smell was assaulting my nostrils even through the cloth, and I was on the verge of crying. If I hadn't come prepared, I

would have immediately retreated.

Thank god I didn't bring Adele.

There were two paths inside, with the sewage flowing in the center. The paths weren't wide enough for people to walk two abreast or use large weapons, so the soldiers were equipped with shortswords.

The hunter's son was the vanguard, slowly walking as he cautiously watched our surroundings. Everything was proceeding smoothly until, suddenly, he stopped and raised two fingers with his left hand. We had decided on hand signs before entering—raising his hand meant that an enemy had appeared, and his fingers indicated their number.

"I'm taking them on," I said, earning surprised looks from the men.

An aristocrat going into the sewers is unprecedented already, and now he wants to fight? What a pain!—was what they were probably thinking. I could understand how having their lord go on the battlefield was troublesome to the soldiers, but I had to become stronger. Even if I had to be smeared with mud, I would obtain enough power to face Seravimia.

"Move," I ordered, and the soldiers hurriedly jumped to the other path across the sewage.

I drew my Twin Hydra Blades and slowly approached the goblins, who were screaming in their ugly voices.

Illuminated by my lantern inside the darkness, the goblins looked just like they did in the game. Though they had poor vision, their eyes had become white and cloudy to adapt to the darkness, and their hooked noses—the characteristic of their species—had shrunken to human size to weaken their sense of smell. They were goblins who had evolved to adapt to the sewers, trading their sight and sense of smell for better hearing. This meant that they had already noticed our presence from our footsteps and were preparing for battle.

"Their weapons are... What are these? Rods?"

It was hard to see in the darkness, but it seemed they were holding iron rods. They were too rudimentary to be called spears, but they had pointed ends they

could use to pierce.

“Gya gya!” the goblin in front of me cried as he thrust at me.

It was with horror that I noticed the brown filth at its tip.

“Ew! That’s disgusting!” I shouted, stepping back in a hurry.

It was going to be a harder fight than I had thought. I was sweating, tense for a completely different reason than I had expected.

“Master Girard! We should be the ones to—”

“Shut up!” I refused Ludwig’s help, screaming so hard that the goblins grimaced and stopped moving to cover their ears. “I’m gonna kill them and get stronger.”

Defeating monsters improved your mana-storing organs, your body’s base physical ability, and how much you could strengthen it with mana. In particular, close combat was more efficient than using magic or fighting from afar. That info came from *Survival Strategies of a Corrupt Aristocrat*, so it couldn’t be wrong. Defeating the lesser earth dragon had improved my strength by a fair amount, but it hadn’t been enough to reach Seravimia. I had to kill more to get stronger.

“Y-Yes, sir.” Ludwig understood my resolve and stopped trying to help.

“Sorry for the wait.” The goblins didn’t understand what I had said, but they noticed from my tone that my fighting spirit was rising and kept their guards up.

I closed the distance in an instant, blocking the incoming iron rod with my left sword and stabbing the first goblin’s arm with my right blade.

Tch, too shallow.

I jumped back to take some distance, avoiding the iron rod I had just parried. It swung down into empty air, hitting the ground with a loud thud. The goblin raised its rod to swing it again, but collapsed before it could. The hydra’s poison had taken effect. As you might expect from a poison known for its potency, it was fast-acting.

“Gya gya?” The other goblin was surprised by what had happened to its kin.

I didn’t give it the time to get back its bearings and immediately threw one of my Twin Hydra Blades. The goblin didn’t manage to avoid the blow in time, and collapsed to the ground with its skull pierced through.

I wasn’t used to fighting in the dark, but everything had gone well. I didn’t actually feel it, but my mana-storing organs should have been strengthened thanks to that.

“Well done!” Ludwig said, clapping his hands as he approached me.

“I defeated a lesser earth dragon. I’m not going to lose against mere goblins.” Hm, that line was kind of third-rate. I would never have said it in my past life, so I guessed it was Jack’s influence on me.

“Of course.” He couldn’t disagree with a noble, but in his mind, he was likely thinking that I had won thanks to how good my weapons were. And, well, I actually felt the same. I had killed the lesser earth dragon thanks to the hydra’s poison. If I truly wanted to become stronger, I might need to use normal weapons instead.

Maybe I should seal my Twin Hydra Blades until I’m strong enough, I thought, as I took the sword that was stabbed into the goblin’s skull and wiped the blood off.

“There are more goblins. Let’s go.”

We started walking through the sewers again, but we changed formation so that I was now the vanguard. A few soldiers tried to go in front of me, but I refused, saying I wanted to fight goblins. Though, in truth, I was planning to guide us toward where Gwynt was being imprisoned.

We proceeded slowly through the darkness while drawing a simple map on a parchment. I had thought the structure of the sewers would be the same as it had been in the game, but it was actually a little more complex. If I had been the game’s creator, it would have felt like the modifications were pointing out my incompetence.

Anyway, as we proceeded smoothly without encountering a single monster, a goblin appeared near our destination. I had been on guard, but I didn’t notice it fast enough to make a hand sign and allowed it to make a surprise attack. With

the soldiers behind me, I couldn't step back and blocked the iron rod swinging down on me by crossing my swords.

"Monster!" I shouted while stepping ahead, kicking the goblin in the gut. Thanks to training with Adele every day, I easily blew it away even without strengthening myself with mana.

It let go of its iron rod and rolled on the ground until falling into the sewage. It would have been so nice if it had drowned, but unfortunately, it got back up. The water level was shallow and only reached up to the goblin's waist. Its head and shoulders were covered in filth, including the corpse of something or other. It made me feel sick just looking at it.

No wonder this can end up in a pandemic!

"Shadow Bind." The goblin's shadow, reflected on the water's surface, bound its upper body. "Now, attack!" I didn't want to get near it, so I ordered Ludwig and the others to kill it instead.

I had expected them to be bewildered by the sudden command, but they moved without hesitation. They sandwiched the monster from the right and left and stabbed it with their shortswords.

I didn't kill it myself, but my mana-storing organs should still have been slightly strengthened. Well, it wouldn't do to fall to illness as the lord of this territory, so it would have to do.

"Good job." I did a little clap with my hands after sheathing my Twin Hydra Blades. They had defeated that filthy goblin for me, so I could at least praise them for it.

"Anyone could take down an immobile target," Ludwig replied. It was dark and hard to see, but the soldiers looked kinda embarrassed at the praise.

I had hoped that the noise we had made would attract more goblins, but not a single one showed up.

"Well then, let's go." After checking that nobody was injured, we resumed our walk, leaving the corpse behind.

While making it look like I was searching for goblins, I guided us through the

complex passages toward my destination.

We arrived before a wall.

“It seems to be a dead end. We should go back, Master Girard.”

“No, wait,” I said, refusing Ludwig’s suggestion.

Just in front of us was the path to the thieves’ den—we couldn’t go back. I took the lantern at my waist and crouched to inspect the wall.

“Look, there’s a strange protrusion.” I pointed at the switch of the secret door. In the game, it was explained that the thieves had spent quite some time making it. I pushed it and a part of the wall slid open, allowing us to proceed.

“I don’t think goblins could make that. Must be humans,” I commented.

“Master Girard...” Ludwig trailed off. Well, yeah, of course he would be bewildered by the discovery of a hidden door made by some mysterious group when the mission had been to take care of goblins in the sewers.

“If they’re not stupid, they should have set up something to know when the door is opened. Let’s go before they run away,” I said before he could suggest that we should retreat to call for reinforcements. I knew from the game that we actually could have retreated, though; the thieves hadn’t noticed.

“Understood. However, it could be dangerous, so please stay behind us.”

“Fine. Proceed with caution.”

Being too unreasonable here would be like saying I found Ludwig unreliable. Killing people didn’t strengthen mana-storing organs anyway, so I didn’t mind following his demand as it also worked as a show of trust.

“Anton, erase your presence and go on ahead. We’ll follow after you.”

“Understood.” Our original vanguard advanced alone down the path.

So his name’s Anton, huh?

He walked slowly, checking the ground, walls, and ceiling for traps until reaching an end where the path turned left. He pressed himself against the left wall and peeked ahead. Then he raised his right hand with a clenched fist,

meaning it was safe for us to come.

“Let’s go,” Ludwig said.

I followed after him, surrounded by soldiers. Anton didn’t wait for us to reach him to continue ahead. When we arrived where Anton had been, we stopped and I also peeked at the left path. Further away, I could see a locked wooden door with what seemed to be the doorman before it, dead on his chair with his throat slit. Probably the work of Anton, who had made the levelheaded decision that there wasn’t a need to let a suspicious guy like that live. He was currently searching the body for the key.

After we waited for a while, Anton came back. “I could not find something indicating his identity, but I did locate the key.”

Ludwig looked at me, asking me what we should do with his eyes.

“No need to take prisoners. Kill them all.”

My permission given, the soldiers let out their bloodlust. They were really motivated, so they weren’t likely to lose.

“How do we break in?”

“I’m leaving it to you, Ludwig,” I replied, making him smile. I had something else to do, so I planned to stay a few steps behind them.

“Anton, you open the door. The rest of us will enter once he’s seen inside.”

“Please, leave the vanguard to me,” said a soldier whose name I didn’t know. It was probably out of rivalry with Anton, who was having an active role. He looked around fifteen—how young.

“Fine. Don’t die.”

“Yes, sir!” he answered with a smile, glad to have been chosen. He then followed after Anton, who was checking for traps around the door.

“No traps,” Anton said. Ludwig signaled him to enter, so he opened the lock and kicked the door. The young soldier followed after him, then the others too.

“Who the hell are you?!”

“Why are you here?!”

“Kill them!”

Hoarse voices yelled from inside the room, then I began to hear the telltale sounds of fierce combat.

As everyone else was fighting, I was now alone without anyone watching me. I peeked into the room. There were five thieves against my ten soldiers. It went without saying that the latter had the advantage. The young soldier who had followed after Anton had been injured, but he could still move.

Anyway, they would win without me, so I could accomplish my other objective.

“It should be around here...”

I returned to the middle of the hidden passage and touched the wall in search of a switch. The room I’d just come from was a decoy, and the boss of the thieves was somewhere else. It was bait to make the players think they had finished the quest, only to have something nasty like “The main force of the thieves is somewhere else, so you didn’t solve the problem! You failed the side quest! What a shame!” appear on the screen when exiting the sewers.

During my first run, I almost broke my keyboard in rage. That was when I had become certain that the game’s creator was a piece of shit with a broken personality—and meeting Seravimia had just confirmed it.

“Oh, there it is.”

I found a protrusion near the ceiling and pressed it, making the wall slide open to reveal another hidden passage. From here on, it was going to be the real deal.

With only my lantern as a source of light, I walked down the path. In the game, it was a straight path and the thieves’ den wasn’t far—and it seemed it was the same in reality as I could see light at the end of the passage.

I turned off my lantern and concealed myself in the darkness. I crouched and slowly advanced until just before the edge of the light and stopped to look into the room. Inside were another ten men and Gwynt, bound with a rope at the center. He had a petite and slender body, only around 140 centimeters, and shoulder-length blue hair. With no beard or even any body hair, he looked just

like a girl but was, without a doubt, a man.

Basically, he was what one might call a femboy, an otokonoko, you name it. What's more, it came with misfortune as a package deal and he often ended up in erotic situations, which earned him the passionate support of a number of players.

"Boss, what do we do with him?" asked one of the thieves to the man with the buffest body as he grabbed Gwynt's hair.

Just like in the game, the boss seemed to be an axe user—I could see his large weapon leaning on the wall next to him. He had a thick beard, and the top of his shirt was wide open and showing off his chest hair, which was quite gross. His arms, fingers, and legs were hairy too. It was hard to believe that he and Gwynt were of the same sex.

"If only he was a woman, I could have some fun... You sure he's a guy?"

"I checked his crotch, boss. No doubt about it."

The boss clicked his tongue and furrowed his brows as he took his axe. "If I can't have some fun, then let's just kill 'im."

The reason Gwynt had been kidnapped was because the thieves had thought he was a girl. Unfortunately for Gwynt, male slaves fetched a lower price than female slaves, so they'd just decided to dispose of him.

"Boss, wait!"

"What?"

"We can't sell him, but he's got a pretty face. It'd be such a damn waste!"

So those unfortunate erotic events even happen in reality, huh? I mused as I waited for an opening.

"Ain't his ass good enough to have some fun, at least?"

"You're a real piece of..." The boss let out an exasperated sigh and sat on the floor. The other thieves watched silently. It seemed like they were planning to enjoy the show. "It ain't any fun if you just do it normal-like, so make 'im squirm a little."

“Got it!”

Having received his boss’s permission, the thief removed Gwynt’s rope and mounted him.

“I-I’m a man!” Gwynt objected in a tearful voice.

“That’s the best part!” Unfortunately, it only served to excite the thief, who smiled broadly as his package stiffened.

“Noooo!” Gwynt screamed, desperately writhing around. He managed to kick the bandit as the man was trying to remove Gwynt’s pants.

Not restrained anymore, he stood up and tried to flee, but two other thieves came and pinned his limbs down. In the process, they tore his clothes, revealing Gwynt’s upper body. While he had some muscles, his body had a certain feminine roundness that really made me doubt his gender.

“Good! This is gettin’ nice and steamy!”

He must be reaching his limit. Time to help.

“Shadow Walk.”

I moved to the shadow of the man binding Gwynt’s arms and stabbed him from behind with one of my Twin Hydra Blades. Then, while they were still surprised by my sudden appearance, I thrust my blade into the head of the one who was pinning down Gwynt’s legs, and followed by cutting the arms of the dirty man who had exposed his lower half.

In seconds, three of them were down. They screamed in pain, foam bubbling up from their mouths as they breathed their last. The hydra’s poison had killed them. With this, there were only seven enemies left. Unfortunately, it wouldn’t go as smoothly from here on—I was surrounded.

“Who the hell are you?!” screamed the boss, armed with his axe.

Come on, is that really the first thing you do in such an urgent situation? Ordering your underlings or even just attacking me would be a better move, I thought as I ignored him, not intending to reveal my identity.

“Shadow Bind.”

The bandits' shadows stretched. There was obviously no way that mere thieves could resist my magic, so their bodies were quickly restrained. If it were like in the game, then this bunch should be the last of them. Arresting them would only cost me more money, so I decided to just kill them here and now.

I decapitated the thieves one after another.

"D-Don't kill me!" one of them yelled, begging for his life in tears, but I ignored him.

Just die while repenting for the crimes you've committed.

"Do you want money? We don't have any!"

"Shut up."

I gagged them with my shadows so I didn't have to hear their whining anymore. They still tried to speak, managing to produce muffled sounds, but it was far quieter than earlier, making the room more pleasant. As I cut the fourth neck, Gwynt, who had finally calmed down, talked to me.

"Are you going to kill them all?"

People in this world weren't game characters. He wasn't going to follow me because I had cleared some requirements; I had to take his feelings into account.

I stared at him silently. I thought for an instant that I might need to change my plan if he was disgusted by what I was doing, but it didn't seem like that was the case. His question was just out of pure curiosity. Then there was no problem with continuing as I'd planned.

"Of course. I have no reason to let them live."

"What about handing them over to the military police...?"

"You mean to let the lord judge them?"

"...Yes."

That was a fair question. While it didn't really matter for your usual bandit, these ones had made a hidden room in the sewers. So they should be arrested and interrogated to know how they had made it. However, here was the thing: I

already knew the answer. In *Survival Strategies of a Corrupt Aristocrat*, it was explained that this place was a shelter made by a past head of House Girard. They'd been afraid of a revolt—the result of exploiting the people for generations—and had constructed secret passages and hidden chambers around the town.

In short, it was a legacy from the past.

"In that case, I'm judging them now. So stay quiet and watch."

"Huh?" Gwynt let out a dumb voice, not understanding what I was saying, but I ignored him and decapitated another thief. Two left.

The boss was looking at me with bloodshot eyes, so I decided to kill him next.

"You've been stealing from people, and now that it's your turn you get mad?" I provoked him and he snapped, his face red from rage as he tried to destroy the shadow binding him.

That was actually the perfect chance to see how well my *Shadow Bind* could endure, so I went for the remaining underling first. When I looked back at the boss, he'd managed to tear off his shadow.

So it's possible to escape on your own, huh? Kinda weak.

"Your lord is dealing with you with his own hands. Be grateful as you die."

"What?! You're that damn murderer, Baron Girard?!" He stood up, roaring in anger from hearing I was the baron. I've been getting used to being vilified since becoming Jack, so I didn't mind.

"Indeed, it is I. What, you've got a complaint? Unfortunately, I don't accept them," I continued to provoke him while watching for his reaction.

"It's your fault we're here!"

"No, you're the ones who made that decision. I take no responsibility."

"What?!"

I knew what he meant. He had become a thief because of my father's bad government. I could empathize, but the one he should complain to was my sleeping father.

“Why the surprise? Or rather, should you really be so carefree about this? I’m waiting, so just take your axe already.” I sneered at him, and he finally grabbed his axe and attacked me.

“I’m gonna avenge my boys! Die!”

If I remembered correctly, he was level 8 in the game. It was a great opportunity to test my strength, so I decided to fight without magic or the hydra’s poison.

I dodged the axe to the right and swung one of my blades, easily cutting his left arm clean off.

“Gyaaaaah!” he screamed in pain.

Damn, my weapon’s so good that this is easy even without the poison... Can’t test myself like this.

“Why do you damn nobles steal everything from us?!” he shouted, pressing down on his new stump.

Only an innocent person has the right to say that. A thief like you has no right to blame House Girard.

“I’ll atone for my father’s crimes, so you ought to make up for yours,” I declared insincerely—as Gwynt was watching—and decapitated the boss with one of my Twin Hydra Blades. With the deed done, I spoke to Gwynt. “Are you all right?”

Assaulting an aristocrat was considered an act of rebellion and was punishable by death. It was common sense in this world, and I thought Gwynt would agree with it, but...he was looking at me with a frightened expression.

Shit! Did I do the wrong thing?!

“A-Are you going to kill me too...?”

Phew, he’s just under the notion that I think he’s a thief too. But man, does that look really poke at your sadistic desires. And the way he’s hiding his chest with his arms almost made me doubt that he wasn’t a girl.

“Who would be stupid enough to also kill the victim?” I said exasperatedly, sheathing my swords and raising my hands to show I didn’t intend to harm him.

“I’m Jack Girard, the baron of this territory. I heard that thieves were in the sewers and came to investigate.”

“Alone? Even though you are a noble...?”

Good, he wasn’t an idiot and knew to doubt people.

“Naturally, I came with my soldiers. I got lost on the way, though,” I joked with a smile, replacing the serious face I’d had since entering the room.

It made Gwynt smile too, but it was a little stiff. He was a bad actor, but that actually made me like him more. After all, I loved honest people.

“However, getting lost wasn’t all that bad. I could save you thanks to that.” I offered my hand to him, as he was still sitting on the floor. “I’ll protect you until we’re out. What’s your name?”

“Huh? Ah, Gwynt.”



“Nice name.” I continued to smile, hoping that would make him feel more at ease.

He looked at my face and then my hand. He wasn’t stupid and understood my intention, so not wanting to be rude by refusing, he took my hand. I firmly squeezed back and pulled him up. The instant I let go of his hand, he hid his chest again, embarrassed. We weren’t going to make any progress at this rate, so I stripped the jacket from one of the corpses and handed it to Gwynt.

“Put this on until we’re back to the surface.”

He grimaced in disgust, but there wasn’t anything else he could use, so he took the bloody jacket and put it on with teary eyes.

Scouting was a job that made you tread dangerous routes and needed you to be strong-willed. And yet, the Gwynt in front of me looked quite weak-minded. The player was the one controlling him in the game, so it was possible to force him to fight monsters, but that was impossible in reality. There was a chance that he would flee in terror and abandon his comrades.

Is making him my ally really the right move...? I second-guessed myself.

“Thank you very much. You saved me.” His voice brought me back from my worries. He had finished dressing and was now standing before me.

Oh well, I’ll check how useful he is later. For now, the goblins come first.

“Master Jack!” I heard Ludwig’s voice from afar. They had likely noticed my absence after dealing with the other thieves.

“I’m over here!” I shouted.

Numerous footsteps resounded through the sewers as my soldiers came rushing into the room.

“Who are they?” Ludwig asked, confused, as he saw the corpses on the ground.

“Other bandits. There was another hidden room.”

“What?!” he exclaimed in surprise.

However, I wanted to quickly check Gwynt’s abilities, so to avoid more

questions, I continued. “There was a victim, so let’s go back to the entrance for now.”

The soldiers looked at Gwynt. He must not have liked it because he hid behind me. He was so pitiful looking that it soured the mood in the room. The soldiers were probably thinking that he was a poor girl who had been assaulted by the bandits.

“I think you’re misunderstanding something. He’s a guy.”

I’d done my due diligence in explaining—now, whether they believed me or not was on them.

* * *

Ludwig and the other soldiers had killed all of the other thieves, so we took some spoils of war and exited the hidden room. We were heading back toward the sewers’ entrance with Gwynt as our vanguard. I had given him equipment from one of the soldiers and put him on the job to check his abilities. That had earned me some protest from the soldiers, of course, but I used my authority to dismiss them. Thankfully, Gwynt had said he was good at scouting, so they somehow agreed to it in the end.

“Next, we turn right,” Gwynt said without hesitation. The thieves had had a map, and he had memorized it in a few seconds. Considering how perfectly he understood our current location, he had a pretty good sense of direction.

The next question was how he would act when encountering monsters. As I was thinking that there were still a lot of goblins left and hoped we’d bump into some, Gwynt raised his hand. What good timing. He only showed a single finger, so that meant the monster was alone.

He went ahead on his own to confirm the situation, then returned. “There is a big rat.”

“How big?”

“Around the size of a child.”

That was larger than what I’d imagined a “big rat” to be. The game had only mentioned the goblins, but maybe the rats had also been responsible for

spreading disease. It would be a pain if it got out, so we should deal with it here and now.

“Can you defeat it, Gwynt?” I asked.

“Yes. Leave it to me,” he answered firmly.

He looked like a different person from the one I had saved. Was he the kind of guy who flipped a switch and changed personality when working? I’d been thinking that I would have to fight if he couldn’t, but it looked like that wasn’t going to be necessary.

“Good. Then go.”

My permission given, he ran toward the big rat with a longsword he had snatched from one of the bandits and swung it down with a cute yell. He must have been strengthening his body with mana because it was so fast it was difficult to follow him.

“She... Er, no, *he’s* strong,” Ludwig muttered behind me.

Everyone had mana-storing organs, but they varied in effectiveness. In Ludwig’s case, they were average, but Gwynt’s were highly efficient, which was the reason he could fight despite how slender his body was. However, it looked like he was specializing in speed, and his strikes weren’t that powerful. Adele and I were the kind who strengthened everything, so it was the first time I met someone who specialized only in one aspect.

“Looks useful, right?”

“Do you intend to receive him as a guest like Adele?” Ludwig asked, understanding my aim. It was great that he could get what I meant without me going into details. Promoting him to captain had been the right choice.

“Exactly.”

Ludwig nodded and focused back on the fight.

The big rat was riddled with wounds, its body coated with blood, but none of it was fatal. Gwynt wasn’t powerful enough—and, as the combat continued, he was running out of breath. He was likely nearing the limit of his stamina, as he stopped attacking and devoted himself to dodging. However, after evading a

few attacks, he was driven to a wall, and the big rat widened its jaw to deliver the coup de grâce.

"Ta!" Gwynt let out a high-pitched shout as he jumped, rotated vertically, and put his feet on the ceiling. Then with his longsword pointed down, he propelled himself toward the big rat. The monster was looking around, searching for its missing prey, when the blade pierced the crown of its head, penetrating its skull and its brain. Gwynt had used the momentum from his fall to compensate for his lack of strength.

As expected of a named character. A clever way to fight—I should praise him.

However, before I could, goblins appeared behind us. They likely had heard the noise from the battle against the big rat. I wanted to fight them, but I had to talk alone with Gwynt, so I unfortunately had to leave them to Ludwig and the rest.

"I'm going to check on Gwynt. You guys take care of the goblins."

"Yes, sir!" Ludwig shouted gladly—even though these goblins were sensitive to sound—and went in the direction of the monsters with his subordinates.

Now free from their watch, I walked over to Gwynt. "That was a splendid fight."

"Thank you very much."

He was back to his usual frail self. He seemed unreliable, but I now knew that he was a man who could fight once he was on the job. Considering it could also be used to make enemies drop their guard, I should be glad that it increased my tactical options.

Now, the next problem: how to get him on my side?

If I behaved oppressively and forced him to obey me, he would probably accept, but he wouldn't take his work seriously and there was a risk of betrayal. I had to make him *want* to work for me. I decided to probe him a little.

"You're a good scout. Who's your teacher?"

"Nobody. I am self-taught."

"Did you learn through experience?"

“I am poor, so that was the only way,” he said with a feeble smile.

Could it be that because he doesn’t have anyone to compare to, he has no confidence in himself? I think I know how to deal with him.

“That’s also my fault.”

“H-Huh?! No, you have nothing to do with it, Lord Jack!”

“No, I do. Even though the people were suffering because of my parents, I didn’t notice and let it happen. If the territory had been properly governed, your family would have had enough money and your future would have been completely different.”

I had told the thieves’ boss earlier that this hadn’t been my responsibility, and yet now I was saying the opposite. I was contradicting myself, but Gwynt didn’t notice.

I paused for a second, then slightly bowed my head. I chose to apologize and admit my mistake. “Sorry.”

“A noble...apologized...?” he let out, dumbfounded. He’d grown up in the Girard territory—to him, aristocrats were tyrants.

Before he could recover from his shock, I continued. “Even with such an upbringing, you fought hard and managed to get the strength necessary to survive. You should be praised for that.” I put my hands on his shoulders and moved my face closer to his. I felt like he was blushing a little, but it was dark, so I was likely only seeing things. “You have wonderful skills, Gwynt.”

“I-I do?”

“Yeah. I think you’re very talented.”

If he had no confidence, I just had to overpraise him. It had worked for Adele, so I knew it was effective. The objective was to make him dependent on me by showing him that I was the only one who understood him.

“But my only redeeming quality is my nimbleness. I am a weak man—I was struggling against a mere rat...”

“You only think that because you have nobody to compare yourself to. You’re special.”

“Really? I find that hard to believe.”

Of course, I had expected him to react like that. If you could get a boost in confidence just by getting praised, low self-esteem wouldn’t be much of an issue.

“It’s the truth. As a noble, I’ve seen tons of warriors, so I can guarantee it. And to prove it, I have a suggestion.”

“Yes?” His voice was mingled with both expectation and anxiety.

Good, this should work.

“Want to become my vassal? I’ll prepare a room for you in my mansion, and you’ll be paid more than the average soldier. How about it?”

“Thank you for the invitation. I am truly honored.”

I know, right? Of course you would be! Ha ha ha ha! I did it! First Adele, and now Gwynt!

“But I refuse.”

...Wut? Seriously? I froze at Gwynt’s unexpected words, letting go and taking a step back.

“Why?!” I shouted after a while.

The conversation was going perfectly! I can’t see why he would refuse!

“I am searching for my grandfather,” he answered.

I gasped. *Damn it! That’s the “Gwynt’s Worry” event!* There hadn’t been any lead-up to it, so I hadn’t immediately noticed.

Anyway, this outcome was kind of a pain. The difficulty was on the higher side, and to solve it I would need to go to Fourth Village’s forest, where monsters were lurking around. The reason for the difficulty was the sheer number of monsters. If we didn’t prepare enough, there was a chance we could suffer a crushing defeat, but it wasn’t like we would have to fight another lesser earth dragon, so I still had ways to deal with them.

“Did he disappear?” I asked.

“Yes. He usually goes out for a few days, but this time it has been a month

and he still has not come back home.”

“So you’re searching for him.”

“Yes...”

And he’d been captured by the bandits while asking around. That explained how he’d ended up where I had found him. They had likely told Gwynt that they would take him to his grandfather.

“In that case, I’ll help you find him.”

“Huh?”

“But not for free. If I find him, you’ll become my vassal. How about it?”

There was a limit to how much you could do alone. Even more so for a commoner, as traveling necessitated money and some official procedures. But everything changed the moment I, the lord of the domain, got involved. Traveling became a breeze, and I could provide a large amount of man power for the search. This time, I was certain he would accept.

“Why would you go so far for me?”

“I told you. You’re very talented. It’d be a waste to leave you alone.”

“I am...talented...?” With no confidence in himself, he still couldn’t believe me and couldn’t decide what to do.

“It seems you can’t understand your own worth. Then let’s forget about you becoming my vassal for now. I’ll help you for free. Still wanna turn me down?”

“B-But—”

“Still wanna turn me down?” I didn’t want him to find other excuses, so I let out a faint trace of bloodlust.

“N-No, I accept! Please, help me!” Understanding that I was losing my temper, he reflexively accepted my proposal.

Good, now my plan to make him my comrade can progress.

Just as our talk finished, I heard footsteps from behind us. I turned around and found Ludwig and the other soldiers on their way back.

“Did you deal with the goblins?”

“Yes. With this, I think we have killed around half of the goblins who have been reported to be in the sewers,” Ludwig answered.

So there was still another half left. I had found Gwynt, so my presence wasn’t needed anymore. I should let the soldiers take care of the rest.

“Good job. I’m going back to the surface, so I’ll leave the rest to you.” It was pretty selfish, but it was my right as an aristocrat.

I let Ludwig and the soldiers continue the exploration of the sewers and had Gwynt guide me to the exit, then we both headed for my mansion.

Interlude: Baron Dulac's Conspiracy

I had heard that the hero was targeting the Girard territory from Count Belmond around half a year ago. Apparently, there was a rumor that treasures even the royal family didn't know of were resting in that backward region.

As such, I had felt that my best opportunity was immediately after officially succeeding the Dulac barony. After all, the neighboring territory was full of buried treasures, and having money meant rising in status as an aristocrat. It was natural that I would try to obtain them before the hero and Count Belmond.

So I procured a lesser earth dragon for a hefty sum, thinking that it would absolutely kill Baron Girard, but he unexpectedly survived. I had prepared the perfect plan: to use the excuse of his accidental death to occupy his demesne under the pretense of taking care of it. I even had laid the necessary arrangements to make it work with Count Belmond and the royal family, so it was truly a shame.

I had thought the Girard territory was on the verge of ruin, but they apparently still had the strength to fight. If attacking from the front was too dangerous, then I would use a method more fitting for a noble to destroy his domain.

* * *

Today, I went to the barracks to see my soldiers' training.

I sat on the chair that had been prepared for me, drinking black tea under the sunlight as I watched them do combat practice. There were around fifty people, and among them was my son. He had been learning swordsmanship since a young age and was strong enough to overpower any of the soldiers. He was still inferior to the knights serving me, but good enough to invade the territory of a rural baron.

"Baron Dulac, you have a visitor," said Media, a maid working in my mansion. She wasn't beautiful, but she was calm and obedient, so I kept her by my side.

She wore a ring on her right ring finger, so I figured she had a lover. I intended to sleep with her just before their marriage and was eager to see the frustrated face her man would make.

“Who?”

“Sir Kyle from the Welza Company.”

He was the representative of the company employed by the Girard territory. I had them report Baron Girard’s movements to me. They were also the ones who had been in charge of capturing the lesser earth dragon and negotiating with the lizardmen. It cost me, but they were a useful bunch that could act in my stead.

“Bring him in.”

“Understood.” She bowed and left.

I returned to watching the soldiers’ practice. They were all elites I had spent money and time training. In terms of swordsmanship, I did not doubt that they were just as strong as the capital’s soldiers. Unfortunately, close combat was useless against large-scale magic spells, and people who had such talent all went to the capital, so none remained in either my territory or Baron Girard’s.

As the soldiers who had finished their combat practice were resting, weapons were distributed to them. They were all delighted to see that the blades were brand new.

“These swords were made by a popular blacksmith in the capital. It was quite difficult to procure them.”

I recognized the voice—Kyle. I turned back and found him standing next to Media, grabbing her ass with his hand plastered with jeweled rings. He was a corpulent man with thin hair, and always sweating, presumably overheating from all the extra fat.

“It was still within budget, I hope.” I had actually collected a large debt because of the shady work I’d had them do for me against the Girard territory, so I couldn’t waste any more money and needed to be careful about my expenses.

“Of course.”

“No problem, then. Good work.” I paused a second, then cut to the chase. “How is Baron Girard acting recently?”

“All that man does is train and take care of government affairs. And now, he is maintaining the sewers. He is so stupid that he still has not noticed our betrayal.”

He only dealt with the problems in front of him and hadn’t even noticed that his domain was being targeted. He was as foolish as his father. It was because he was so insensitive to his surroundings that he was being attacked. Being an aristocrat was all about connections; the moment you refused contact with others, everything was over for you.

“Then prepare for the next assault. We’ll use a slave collar again.”

The plan to lay waste to his domain via enslaving a monster was still ongoing. We’d already found a useful monster, and all that was left was to execute the plan. I even had given them the authorization to use a special magic item, so it shouldn’t fail this time.

“I’m leaving it to you and your company, Kyle.”

“Of course. We shall take care of Baron Girard. However—”

“I know. I’ll keep my promise.”

I had agreed to contract the Welza Company in exchange for them betraying Baron Girard. Selling their previous client made them failures as merchants, but that was useful to me so I let them live for now. However, once the Girard territory was mine, I planned to dispose of them before what I had done could come to light. It was the obvious thing to do. After all, who could trust traitors?

“Well then, I shall go begin the preparations.”

“Wait,” I said. Kyle’s fat belly shook as he suddenly stopped rising from his chair and looked at me. “We’ll make another move at the same time.”

Last time, the plan had been to use the lesser earth dragon to destroy the village. Even if I would be using a different monster this time, I didn’t have full confidence in repeating the same method. Considering my remaining finances, I

really wanted to kill him this time, so I had thought up another plan.

“Yes?”

“Baron Girard is searching for a fiancée. It just so happens that the daughter of one of my knights is on the verge of missing her chance to marry, and I thought I should help.”

Kyle understood what I was implying and grinned vulgarly. What a filthy man. I needed a woman after this to get the bad taste out of my mouth.

“You want to strike from the inside.”

“Exactly. My knight is quite inflexible and a bad liar, so I’ll have him honestly proceed with the betrothal and wait for the right moment to order him to betray Baron Girard.”

Yon was a knight with a strong sense of duty and would never go against me, as I was the person who had saved his life. He would likely hesitate but still side with me in the end. He was my domain’s strongest knight, so I was confident he could kill Baron Girard.

“As expected from you, Baron Dulac.” Kyle praised me, clapping his hands, which made me feel good. “But what if Baron Girard chooses another woman to be his fiancée?”

“If I ask Count Belmond to put some pressure on him, he won’t have a choice.”

Baron Girard didn’t have the power to refuse a request from his liege-lord. Even if he didn’t actually get engaged to her, he’d be forced to at least meet her once to save face for Count Belmond. And once Yon was in his territory, victory was mine. Then I would just need a reason to make him stay for a while and have him betray Baron Girard during the monster assault. The betrothal was just a pretext; it didn’t matter whether he chose another woman.

I truly had concocted the perfect plan.

“The only one I need is the knight, so I don’t mind if you kill his daughter along with Baron Girard. I leave the decision to you.”

And if Yon complained, then I would kill him too. As long as I could get more

money, I could employ better knights. Yon often lectured me, so I wouldn't mind discarding him for someone else.

"Understood. I shall first talk with some people and proceed with the matter of the engagement."

"Once you're done, just tell me the result."

I could hear how it was progressing through Media, who accompanied Kyle, so I didn't even need to move a single finger. The plan to take over the Girard territory would still advance.

If they managed to capture Baron Girard alive, it could be fun to boast that *this* was how an aristocrat used his money and authority to the man's face. I was certain he would hate me, and I was eager to see the expression he would have just before his execution.

Chapter 3: Julianne, A Knight's Daughter

After cleaning myself, I ordered Kevin to put in a request to the Adventurer Guild to deal with the corpses left in the sewers. I also asked him to search for Gwynt's grandfather, which earned me a look of complaint, but I ignored it. I had already sent adventurers to Fourth Village, so it was only a matter of adding it to their current mission. Of course, that meant paying more, but it was a necessary expense.

If you wanted to obtain something, you had to be prepared to lose something in exchange. In short, you needed a strong, unbreakable heart. My goal was to survive and live in the lap of luxury, no matter what. As long as I didn't lose sight of that, I would be able to move forward.

While we were searching for his grandfather, I had Gwynt stay in the mansion. I was working in my office when Kevin brought me a report.

"This is from Fourth Village."

I had hoped this was about Gwynt's grandfather, but it was a request to send reinforcements because the village had sustained too much damage from the monsters. According to the report, the adventurers were also severely outnumbered. A big problem was brewing.

"I guess I have no choice but to send soldiers..."

"I do not think that would be enough. How about asking for help from other territories?"

"As if that's really an option."

There wasn't anything as scary as being indebted to an aristocrat. Asking for reinforcements from my liege-lord or the royal family was the last resort.

"Then will we dispatch our troops?"

"Yeah. And I want to check how things are with my own eyes, so I'll come too." *And search for Gwynt's grandfather while I'm at it*. Considering the

situation, it was better that I act fast.

“Understood. The incident with the sewers should be over soon, so I shall have Ludwig make the preparations.”

“I leave the details to you. Make it so that we can depart in a few days.”

“I shall tell him. Also...”

I had thought that our discussion was done, but that wasn’t the case. Kevin put a letter on my desk.

“This is about your possible fiancée.”

Ah, that strong-willed woman. Maybe she’s changed her mind and doesn’t want to marry the notorious Baron Girard. Maybe it’s a notice of refusal? I thought as I unsealed the letter.

“...They’re coming in five days?” And not just the father, but the woman herself too! I had to go to Fourth Village quickly, so this was a bit of an inconvenience.

“It seems the other party is in quite a hurry.”

That wasn’t on the level of just being in a hurry. Marriage meetings weren’t supposed to go that fast.

“Actually, where do they even live?”

I hadn’t been that interested and had just chosen her because her flaws weren’t a problem for me, but normally, I should have checked that from the beginning. Whose family were they serving?

“They are in charge of a village in the Dulac territory next to ours.”

Baron Dulac had the same liege-lord as me, so there wasn’t any hostility between us. Considering she had been on the list Kevin had brought me, I hadn’t been worried, but I was still relieved to know that it wouldn’t be a problem even if she really did end up as my fiancée.

“Moreover, the royal family and our liege-lord have already been contacted, so there is no issue with proceeding with the betrothal.”

As expected from Kevin, his preparations were flawless. He was way more

enthusiastic about my engagement than I was.

“We need to make preparations to welcome them... No, wait. We’ll just greet them normally.”

“Are you sure?”

“We’re already spending a ton of money because of the monsters and we don’t even have that much time anyway. Don’t really have a choice here.” Kevin understood our economic difficulties and didn’t complain. “I’m gonna write a letter. Wait a minute.”

The other party was a knight, so I had to write the letter myself. I took a parchment and wrote that I accepted the date of our meeting. I put the letter in an envelope, sealed it with wax, and gave it to Kevin.

“I shall make sure that they receive it.” Kevin bowed reverently and left the office.

On the surface, he truly looked like an obedient retainer. I didn’t know how long the situation would stay like that, but for now, I had no other choice but to keep using him.

Now alone, I decided to go back to work and had just taken up my pen when someone knocked on the door. I told them to enter. It was Adele, wearing a maid uniform and holding a bucket with a cloth in her hands.



“Can I clean the room?”

“Of course.”

My permission given, she put the bucket on the floor and started to clean the bookshelves on the wall.

“Did anything happen while I was away?” I asked while watching her work.

“No.”

I had mainly asked her to keep an eye on Lumié, and it seemed she hadn’t shown signs of betrayal. I had been a little worried because my fiancée candidate was coming, but there shouldn’t be any problem in that case.

“Good work. I’m counting on you to continue monitoring this.”

“Certainly!” she answered with a smile, glad to have been praised, then came over to my desk for some reason.

“I need to finish my work first before you clean here.”

However, Adele ignored me and bent down so that her nose was near my neck, her tail swaying.

Ah, she’s checking my scent. Well, if that was enough to put her in a good mood, I didn’t mind her doing it.

She sniffed my chest, my abdomen, and even my lower half, then she finally stopped.

“How was it?”

I wasn’t in the mood for work anymore, and for the first time, I asked for her impressions. I was curious how much she could understand from my scent.

“I had thought that Gwynt was a woman, but from your scent, Master Jack, it seems she is a he. Is Gwynt a man?”

“Y-Yeah, he’s a guy,” I replied, a little flustered.

I had taken a bath and changed clothes, and yet... A beastfolk nose was far more sensitive than I had imagined, and it seemed they could glean quite a bit of information.

She was currently hugging me happily, but it scared me to think about how she would react if she smelled the scent of another woman on me. Sometimes, Jack's body really made me want to lay my hand on a woman, but I seriously needed to endure. I was scared to think about what would happen if I didn't.

"I see. I think Lumié has misunderstood his gender, so should I tell her?"

"Obviously. I don't want any accidents."

The misunderstanding might cause big trouble later, so I needed everyone on the same page about this.

"Understood! I will tell her!"

Adele stopped hugging me and sat on my lap, facing me. If someone saw us, they would likely think we were lovers. She put her arms around my neck and moved her face near mine. I could smell her refreshing scent and feel her soft breasts on my chest. We were so close that I could even feel the beating of her heart and her body's warmth.

That was getting a little too intimate, so I grabbed her body to separate us.

"No! Please, let me stay like this for a little while."

What?! She's going against me?! I was quite surprised, considering how obedient she had been until now.

"Why?" I promptly asked.

"...Do I have to say it?"

"I want to know more about you, Adele. Tell me." I said it in a way that would make her mistake my feelings for love.

And, just as intended, it worked. She blushed and started to fidget, unable to calm down.

"Well, if you insist..." She stayed on my lap but leaned back so our chests were no longer touching. Her lips quivered before she finally resolved herself and spoke. "You are going to get a fiancée, right? So I started to think that we will not be able to meet any more after your marriage, and it made me so lonely..."

That's what she's worried about?!

True, she wouldn't be able to hug me like she just did, or even check my scent regularly. There would indeed be more distance between us, which was something that she didn't want. I was planning to live separately from my spouse-to-be, so the thought hadn't occurred to me.

"I understand your concern, Adele." I patted her head gently. Far from hating it, she closed her eyes in bliss and her dog ears drooped.

She's making such a happy and peaceful face. I don't deserve such a good instructor-cum-guard.

"Even if I get married, our relationship won't change. I'll refuse to marry anyone who complains. So don't worry about it."

"Really?"

"Of course. I live as I want, and marriage isn't going to change that." That should dispel her anxiety.

Adele widened her eyes and hugged me. I felt my shirt dampening, so she was likely crying.

Phew, that could have gotten dangerous if she hadn't said something.

If we hadn't had this talk, it was possible that she would have accumulated too much stress and attacked my future spouse. No, maybe she would even have disappeared and left forever.

Anyway, it wasn't really a bad ending flag, but there certainly had been a possible future where my instructor-cum-guard left me.

I'm so glad I've avoided that, I thought as I stroked Adele's back.

* * *

Today was the arrival of my fiancée candidate.

Lumié came to the courtyard as I was training with Adele. "Ser Yon has arrived."

That was the name of my fiancée candidate's father. If I remembered correctly, his full name was Yon Froid, and his daughter was only called

Julianne, as she wasn't considered an aristocrat.

"Guide them to the parlor. I'll come once I've washed my sweat off."

"Will that be acceptable?"

I had the higher status in the peerage, but Julianne was potentially my fiancée. Lumié was worrying that making her wait might leave a bad impression.

"It doesn't matter. If Ser Yon gets angry for this much, then that's as far as we should go."

Lumié looked like she wanted to say something else, so I tossed my wooden sword at her and went back into the mansion. Once in the bath, I washed my sweat and dirt away with soap. It wasn't as good as soap from Japan, but good enough to stay hygienic, so I made sure to bathe every day.

Once clean and refreshed, I went to the dressing room and wiped my body down with a towel before dressing. Today's guest was a knight, so I wore my white shirt and black-with-purple suit jacket set. Then I attached a badge with the Girard family crest engraved onto it, and my preparations were complete.

Rich nobles would have a maid to do this for them, but my family was poor, so I did it myself. And, well, even if I had the money, I wouldn't want to be naked and defenseless before someone else, so I would do it by myself regardless.

Anyway, I stepped out into the corridor and found Lumié waiting for me.

"I shall take you to our guests."

"I'm leaving it to you."

She bowed instead of replying and started to walk. I followed her until we arrived in front of the parlor, and she knocked on the door.

"Baron Girard has arrived."

The door opened from the inside—it was Adele in a maid uniform. She was here as my guard and probably had two large knives hidden under her skirt.

As I entered the room, a man and woman pair stood from the sofa. The man,

who looked around forty, was Yon Froid. He was past his prime as a knight, but his body was well-trained and he had a good build. I was certain that he had slaughtered tons of monsters and that his mana-storing organs were greatly enhanced. He had short silver hair and his face was well-proportioned with a tidy look, so he was likely popular with the ladies.

“Sorry for the wait,” I said, shaking Yon’s hand as he held it out before me.

“No, this is nothing. I greatly enjoyed the black tea that your maid served us.”

“The taste of the black tea is the only thing my domain can take pride in. Can I hear your impressions?”

“It was sweet, and quite refreshing for my tired bones. Does it help with exhaustion?”

“If it had such an effect, we would sell it everywhere as our specialty.”

We laughed together. It hadn’t been particularly funny, but it served as a sign to show that our informal small talk was over.

Yon let go of my hand and presented himself. “I am Yon Froid, a knight serving Baron Dulac. I am grateful that you chose my daughter as your fiancée candidate.”

“I’m Jack Girard. Pleased to meet you.”

Our greetings completed, Yon turned to the woman in a red dress next to him. I also looked her way and finally got the chance to observe the face of my possible fiancée-to-be.

Julianne had a short bob with the same silver color as her father. And, just as I had been informed, she had a scar from the right side of her nape to her cleavage. It was more conspicuous than I had expected.

“This is my daughter, Julianne. Just like me, she specializes in swordsmanship and is strong enough to not lose against the average monster.”

Considering how he was praising a point that was a flaw for an aristocrat’s wife, he must be truly proud of the fact that his daughter could fight.

“Then I can assume that this scar comes from combat?” I wanted to see his reaction, so I asked a slightly impolite question.

“She was facing an ogre. This scar is a badge of honor.” He didn’t get angry at my rudeness, nor was he ashamed of it. Being proud of a scar that should be hidden showed that he wasn’t trapped in the common sense of noble society. It was unexpected and made me like him a little.

“I see. I understand that she is your prized daughter.” That said, I still needed to be careful and probe them. “Please, sit.” We sat in front of each other on our respective sofas, then Lumié served us black tea. I took a sip and resumed the conversation. “I thank you for coming from so far away and am glad to be able to meet you both face-to-face.”

Yon was smiling, but I couldn’t read his expression. As for Julianne, she only stared at me silently, which was kinda awkward.

“The reason for your visit is the matter of our betrothal, correct?” I already knew the answer from their letter, but I wanted to hear it directly from their mouths.

“Indeed, I came to ask you if you would like to take my daughter’s hand.”

“Do you truly wish to follow through with the engagement?” My question was for Julianne, as being the one who had sent his daughter’s portrait, I already knew that Yon wanted it.

Hmm... I can’t read her. She didn’t seem against it, but neither was she pleased about it. Basically, it was the kind of reaction you would expect from someone before a political marriage.

“Of course. She still does not have a fiancé even though she is already eighteen. There would be no greater joy than you choosing her, Baron Girard,” Yon answered instead.

My peerage was above his and Julianne was eighteen, which was over the marriageable age in this world, so I understood his modest behavior. However, he was going a little too far. Earlier, he had been proud of her scar, which meant he didn’t think it was a flaw, so maybe there was something else.

“Thank you for your opinion, Ser Yon. What about you, Miss Julianne?” I couldn’t count on the father to know the truth, so I asked the daughter directly.

She stayed silent and didn’t reply. After a while, Yon grew impatient.

“Julianne.” He spoke with a commanding voice different from the tone he’d used with me. It was the powerful voice of a knight.

Finally, Julianne opened her mouth. “I...”

What is she going to say? I waited, a little tense.

“I absolutely do not wish to marry a man who would not let me do as I please.”

As a former Japanese person, I understood her. However, this was a world based on *Survival Strategies of a Corrupt Aristocrat,* where men and women weren’t equals. Which meant, of course, that going against her father’s intention was intolerable.

“Julianne! You’re still saying that now?!” Yon yelled, his face red with anger as he stood. “You promised you would give up once you were eighteen!”

“Father. No matter my age, I will never concede on this point.”

“Julianne!”

She opposed her father in front of me and my servants. Yon obviously felt insulted by this and raised his fist to show her some educational guidance.

“Are you going to use violence in front of Baron Girard?” she said, and her father groaned. He couldn’t injure her in front of the person who might become her fiancé. Even more so since she had a big enough scar already.

He wasn’t satisfied, but with no other choice, Yon lowered his fist. But thanks to their squabble, I was starting to see the kind of relationship they had.

I decided to probe a little more. “And what is it that you want to do, Miss Julianne?”

“I want to fight as a warrior, then as a knight if possible in the future.”

Yon put his hand on his forehead and looked at the ceiling—she had said what he had feared. Everything made sense now. Of course he would act as he did if the daughter he was trying to marry to a noble wanted to become a knight. That was a greater problem than her scar. Her job should be to support her husband and birth an heir, yet she wanted to do the exact opposite. No wonder she still hadn’t found a fiancé even after multiple marriage interviews.

However, that was convenient for me. A woman who wanted to spend her time fighting was perfect. We both wouldn't need to spend time together, and not only could we live separately, but I would also be able to have her work outside for me. We would stay apathetic to each other, and I wouldn't mind if she died facing a monster.

"I don't expect anything from my spouse-to-be. You can spend your time fighting monsters if you wish. And considering that nobody would even want to invite a rural baron like me to a party, you don't even need to stay by my side. I won't mind if you do whatever you want."

Putting marriage aside, I started to think that making Julianne my fiancée wasn't a bad idea if that could let me shut up Kevin and my other bothersome retainers. All that was left was to ask if they would still accept even knowing the state of my territory.

"It's too soon to rejoice, though." I gave a warning to Yon, who was looking more delighted than his daughter. "My domain is in a bad state. To be honest, House Froid might be more affluent than us. So if you wish for an aristocratic lifestyle, you should back out now."

If Julianne wasted my money, while I wouldn't do the same as I did to my parents, I would send her back to her family. In that case, her value as a woman would drop like a rock—and if we divorced, she would never be able to find another husband. Or if she actually did, it would be a forced marriage to some old geezer looking for someone to take care of him.

"Of course, that means I can't help House Froid. If you expect monetary or military help with this marriage, then you should find someone else."

What I said was pretty unreasonable. It was assumed that houses united by marriage should help each other, and such opportunities almost always came up. And yet, far from angering her, Julianne smiled.

"As long as you let me live as a knight, I do not wish for anything else. If my family asks for help, then I shall sever my relationship with them."

If she did, I would become her only relative. That meant that, if we divorced, she would be homeless with nowhere to return to. Her words showed the strength of her resolve.

“What about you, Ser Yon?”

In this world, the family head’s decision was absolute. Everyone was tied to their house. Depending on how you saw it, it was either restrictive, or a guarantee that you were protected by your family.

“I do not plan to trouble the house that Julianne marries into,” he answered.

And with this, I got his commitment. Now, even if I married Julianne, I didn’t have to fear my money being stolen, and I wouldn’t have to save House Froid even if they were in a crisis. How convenient.

“Fine. That’s all of my conditions.”

I greatly valued the fact that he didn’t want anything as long as Julianne could become an aristocrat. I might not even need to meet the other fiancée candidates. As I didn’t want to waste my time on illusions such as love and marriage, maybe I should just say yes here. Worst case, I could just cancel our engagement later.

“Does that mean you accept the betrothal?” Yon asked.

“Yes. I’ll have the contract for our engagement made, so please wait a few minutes.”

In this world, betrothals and marriages needed a contract. Three copies were necessary: one for each house, and one for the royal family. The reason the latter was involved was to enable the country to punish the other family in case of betrayal. It was because people weren’t game characters, but flesh-and-blood humans, that using a contract as insurance was necessary.

“Lumié, go tell Kevin.”

“Understood.”

I had already written my conditions, so the contract would be complete once House Froid had written theirs.

With nothing to do as we waited for Lumié to return, I looked outside. Would I be able to reach Fourth Village before nightfall even if I departed immediately after signing the contract? I had to find Gwynt’s grandfather quickly.

“Once we’ve signed the contract, I have to go out. Sorry, but I can’t see you

off.”

“Did something happen?”

Obviously they would ask. Well, it wasn’t like I needed to hide it, so I answered truthfully.

“My domain has four villages, and one of them is under attack from monsters. I’m planning to go there with my soldiers to eliminate them.”

“You are participating yourself, Baron Girard?” Julianne asked with sparkling eyes.

“Yes. I’ll protect my territory with my own hands.”

“That is a wonderful way to think!” Contrary to the I’m-just-here-because-I-have-to face she had earlier, she was now all smiles. She liked fighting—the duty of a knight—more than I had expected. “I am your fiancée now, so may I participate too?”

Well, yeah, I figured that’s how this would go. However, I didn’t answer and looked at Yon, showing that I wanted his opinion.

“Could you bring Julianne with you? I trained her enough to not be a hindrance.”

“Can you say the same knowing that she might die there?”

“Of course.”

An instant reply, huh? Well, if her active knight of a father—though he’s rather old at this point—says it, then she must be rather strong. I want to know more about her and Fourth Village’s situation could do with more help, so I guess I should accept. It’s not like I care if she dies anyway.

“Well, if you insist, Ser Yon, she can accompany me.”

“Thank you for indulging my whim.” Julianne bowed.

“However, you have to follow my orders.”

“Naturally.”

Good response. I don’t forgive betrayal, so be sure to keep your word.

Lumié finally returned, followed by Kevin holding the contract. My conditions were already documented, so now it was House Froid's turn.

Their sole requirement was pretty simple: I had to permit Julianne to fight as a warrior against monsters and villains even after our marriage.

Julianne would rather have used the word "knight" there, but that wasn't possible because she wasn't actually a knight. Falsifying your status was a serious crime, so she would have to make do with "warrior."

"If this is acceptable, sign here," I said as I gave the parchment to Yon. He scrutinized it to not miss anything. *Check it until you're satisfied.*

"Can I prepare for our departure to Fourth Village?" Julianne asked.

Even though the contract about her betrothal was just in front of her, she only cared about fighting. Love easily changed people, transforming them into traitors, so her battle-junkie tendency was quite desirable to me. In fact, considering how my territory was unfortunately full of problems, giving her a little leeway and allowing her to roam free might actually be quite beneficial. Of course, I didn't trust her completely and would have accompanying soldiers keep an eye on her.

"You can." The instant she heard me, her bored expression erupted into a bright grin. If I had to compare it to Adele's adorable smile, hers was like the sun and had the strength to illuminate her surroundings. It looked like it would be useful for raising the soldiers' morale on the battlefield. "You're not used to these lands, so I'll lend you two soldiers familiar with Fourth Village. You can use them however you like." Since I phrased it that way, she wouldn't think that they were monitoring her, and it would be hard for her to refuse.

"Is that fine?"

"You're my fiancée. I can do that much." I didn't want to give her the chance to refuse, so I didn't wait for her reply and turned to Lumié. "It's just as you've heard. Go tell Ludwig to prepare two soldiers."

"Understood."

Now that Lumié had left, Julianne couldn't refuse anymore. I would just need to ask the soldiers to give me periodic reports after that.

“Thank you for your consideration. Well then, I shall go change into the equipment I left in another room.”

Since I hadn’t forbidden her from fighting, she didn’t really mind having the soldiers follow her. She stood up from the sofa and walked toward the door.

“Show her the way, Adele.”

Adele understood that I didn’t want Julianne to be left alone and nodded before opening the door and exiting with her. They were of the same sex, so Adele could follow her even to the bathroom. She thus wouldn’t be able to roam around the mansion to explore it.

As silence returned to the room, Yon stopped reading the parchment and stared at me.

“I have a question.”

“Go on.”

“It is written that in the case of infidelity, the engagement shall be broken and we shall pay indemnities. What do you consider to be infidelity?”

Generally, being with a man that wasn’t family was considered infidelity. Usually, it wasn’t a problem, as the woman would stay in the house to support her husband, but Julianne would often be with other men on the battlefield. He wanted to check that it wasn’t a trap to extort money from them. Considering House Girard’s notoriety, I understood his concern.

“Sleeping with another man. I wouldn’t call something like a clandestine meeting infidelity.”

In fact, as I intended for us to live separately, I didn’t care if she was unfaithful in the slightest. However, I couldn’t have her get pregnant. I would be laughed at as an incompetent who can’t keep watch on his fiancée by the other nobles. I could endure some criticism for her unfaithfulness, but if she had a child with another man, it would cause irremediable damage to House Girard, so I absolutely had to avoid that.

“Then could you add it to the contract?”

“Of course.” I could accept that much no problem. I took the parchment and

added that definition. Then I signed. “Anything else?”

“No.”

“Good. Then if you would sign as well.”

I put the parchment on the table and gave him the pen. He tipped it in ink and was about to sign it before he stopped.

“What’s the problem?”

We both agreed to the content of the contract. I didn’t understand why he would hesitate now.

“What do you think of Julianne, Lord Jack?”

Yon’s face as he stared at me was that of a father wishing for his daughter’s happiness. I figured that he was overcome by anxiety just now because of House Girard’s notoriety.

A father, huh? I couldn’t do anything fatherlike for my child in my previous life, so I didn’t understand Yon’s feelings. However, I did know that you couldn’t underestimate the feelings of a father wishing for his daughter’s happiness. Criticizing Julianne here might lead to betrayal later on. After all, even if you could forget your fears, you never forgot insults.

“She’s a strong woman, which is desirable for a rural baron like me who is suffering from monster assaults. If possible, I hope that we’ll be able to make the domain prosper together.”

My answer seemed to be the right one as Yon’s expression softened.

“Thank you very much.” He finally moved the pen and added House Froid’s signature to the contract.

With this, I became betrothed to Julianne and finally took care of another of the troublesome duties of an aristocrat.

* * *

I—Julianne—followed the beastfolk maid down the plain corridor as she guided me through the mansion. From her footwork and the way she moved her center of gravity, I understood that she practiced martial arts. Maybe she also worked as Baron Girard's guard? And, maybe, she was also his mistress? Not that it mattered to me.

"Hah..." I sighed. I'd ended up betrothed, even though I hadn't wished for it.

Because of my father's influence, my ideal husband always had been a man who would fight enemies together with me. I would love nothing more than a man with rugged hands covered in calluses from using a sword, but...what about Baron Girard? To be honest, I didn't expect much from him. Even if he could fight, I didn't think he was as strong as a knight, so I couldn't imagine us fighting side by side against monsters.

I truly didn't want to get engaged, but being too selfish would just cause trouble for my family. My father had done his best to find him for me, so I had to make some concessions. And, well, he *did* allow me to continue fighting monsters, so I figured I could try to get along with him and the maid walking in front of me for the sake of my family.

"Have you been serving Baron Girard for a long time?" I asked to make some small talk. The question itself didn't have a profound meaning.

"No, only a few months."

"That's not very long. How is work? Difficult?"

"I am allowed to do what I like, so I find it enjoyable."

That was an unexpected answer, and she didn't appear to be lying. That was strange, considering all the rumors about the infamous House Girard. I had heard the servants were treated horribly, and that he laid his hands on the maids before throwing them away like trash—that no one wanted to serve this house. The truth was apparently different.

"There is no greater joy than devoting myself to the man who has recognized my worth," she said, swaying her tail happily. Beastfolk clearly betrayed their feelings through their ears and tails, so it proved that she wasn't lying and actually adored him. Considering how she wasn't hiding her love before me, his

soon-to-be fiancée, she might truly be his mistress.

“Does he ask for your company at night?”

The maid stopped walking and turned back, looking straight at me. “What do you mean?” Her cold, emerald-green eyes and her reaction showed that I had been wrong.

“I only wanted to know if my future fiancé laid his hands on his maids.”

“Then no, he does not. Do not consider Master Jack to be the same as other men.”

“...Sorry for my insensitive question.”

Just how did he have this maid become so devoted to him? I had met Baron Dulac’s maids—the man my father served—several times, and none of them had ever been that loyal. They only did their work. Oddly enough, Baron Girard might be of a higher caliber as a person than Baron Dulac.

“Well then, please follow me.” She ignored my apology—rather surprising, considering I was her master’s fiancée—and silently started to walk again.

“Contrary to the rumors, he seems to be a decent noble. I wonder why he decided to get engaged to me?” I muttered to myself, standing still.

We hadn’t received a special welcome, so I had thought he hated me before we’d even met. So I frankly said that I wanted to act as a knight, hoping to put an end to the talk of our engagement, but that made him accept, instead. He hadn’t seemed put off by my scar either. And, when I asked to go help with the battle at Fourth Village, not only did he consent, he even said he would lend me some of his soldiers. He didn’t seem to think that I should just stay at home and support him, so he was truly nonconformist for an aristocrat. Maybe that was why he had chosen me and not someone else.

Before I knew it, the maid had taken some distance, so I cut off my train of thought and hurried after her, finally reaching the room where we had put our luggage. We entered and I changed, the maid helping me to put on my breastplate and such. Finally, I hung a shortsword at my hip and took my trusted partner—a single-edged spear—thus completing my preparations.

“Where should I go?”

“I shall guide you to the entrance.”

I didn’t think that was the right place to make your master’s fiancée wait, but I didn’t complain.

I guess I should try to keep on her good side for a while, I thought as I exited the room, following the displeased maid.

* * *

Once the contract was signed, I left Yon in the parlor with Kevin to take care of him and went back to my office. Then I had Gwynt summoned as I prepared for our trip to Fourth Village.

“I got a report from my subordinates at Fourth Village. Your grandfather seems to be there. Will you come with me?”

“Y-Yes!”

I had also explained to him that the village was currently under attack by monsters, but that didn’t affect his answer. His leather armor and shortsword were poor equipment, but he had the determination to fight, which reassured me.

“You can’t do as you please, however. You’ll have to take care of the monsters with me first.”

“Naturally.” His reply was honest—he must have been thinking of the crisis the village was facing.

“Good.”

I put on my armor and hung dual swords at my hips. They were made of normal metal, though, and my Twin Hydra Blades were in my luggage.

Once my preparations were complete, I turned toward Lumié. “We’re only leaving two soldiers here. The rest will come with me. I don’t think anyone will be stupid enough to attack the mansion, but stay alert.”

“Understood.”

I didn’t know what she—or anyone else—would do during my absence, so I

stored all the important documents in a safe. That way, I didn't have to worry about anything being lost or altered. And I would have the two remaining soldiers check who comes and goes, so secret meetings should be impossible.

I exited the office with Gwynt and moved to the entrance of the manor. Julianne was waiting for me, wearing her equipment. She looked like the perfect female knight, and the scar on her nape actually made her more attractive in this get-up.

"Let's go."

We exited the mansion. Adele was still in her maid uniform, but her change of clothes and equipment were in the carriage, so she would be able to change on the road.

I entered the carriage first, followed by Julianne. We sat in front of each other, and the coachman closed the door.

"Ser Yon and I signed the contract, so we're now officially betrothed."

"I understand. Please treat me well."

The conversation died. We both kept our mouths shut and were wrapped in silence.

The carriage started to move, and after a while, Julianne finally said something. "Adele seems to truly adore you."

Of course she would, after the trouble I went through to make her my comrade. "She's also my swordsmanship instructor, so I get along with her better than my other subordinates."

"You study swordsmanship, Baron Girard?!"

That was her most overblown reaction since I had met her. I'd mentioned it because I knew she liked knights, but I didn't expect her to react like that. This might be a long-term relationship, so I should try to learn more about her.

"I'm your fiancé, now. Just call me by my first name."

"Ah, yes, Lord Jack."

I didn't make her change what she called me because I wanted her to like me.

No, I just didn't want people to assume we were on bad terms because she called me by my family name even during our private time. We may be betrothed in name alone, but there was a bare minimum that needed to be done.

"Good. Back to the subject of my training, I'm mainly learning how to fight with a sword as well as dual wielding. Sometimes I do practice battles with Adele and the soldiers in the afternoon."

"Can... Can I see your hand?"

"What a strange thing to ask... Here."

I showed her my palm, and she stared at it for a moment before taking my hand and touching my calluses, checking their hardness. I knew some people had a fetish for hands, so I guessed Julianne was one of them.

"Amazing... So hard...and big..." she said, totally entranced.

If someone else was here, I'm sure they would misunderstand what we're doing. Well, we're alone, so no matter, I thought as the carriage suddenly stopped. Still, Julianne didn't notice, and didn't stop touching my hand. As I continued to be at her mercy, the door opened and Adele entered in a hurry.

"Master Jack! Gwynt is—" She suddenly stopped and raised an eyebrow in anger. She slowly walked up until she occupied the space directly between Julianne and me. "Master Jack?"

I could sense the blame in her voice. If I didn't react appropriately, her trust might crater in one go. To think that there would be a trap here!

"Y-Yeah?"

"You two seem close."

If I said we were, Adele's mood and trust would take a nosedive. However, I couldn't say that we weren't either, as that would hurt Julianne's honor. As such, neither was a good answer, and I had to change the subject.

"I explained to her how I trained with you. And to prove it, I showed her the calluses I got from swinging a sword around." Technically, it wasn't a lie. "I have big and hard calluses, no?" I showed her my palm.

“Yes, you do.”

“Right? Thanks to them, Julianne should understand how splendid of an instructor you are.”

“I am...a splendid instructor...” That should have conveyed how much I treasured her, to the point of boasting about her to others. The effect was instantaneous, and she immediately got back into a good mood. “I see, so that was what happened. Sorry for misunderstanding.”

If I were the kind of stupid guy who would screw up and ask her what exactly she’d misunderstood, I wouldn’t be able to survive in the world of *Survival Strategies of a Corrupt Aristocrat.* The ability to ignore things inconvenient to you was very important.

“So, what’s happened?”

“Ah, yes! Gwynt is having a dispute with a soldier!”

Hey! Gwynt’s going to be my ally soon, don’t antagonize him!

“Why?”

“I do not know the details, but I heard the soldier calling Gwynt a liar.”

Don’t tell me it’s one of those unfortunate erotic situations that happen to him?! I couldn’t predict when they would happen, so they were a real pain.

“Let’s go see.” I stood up.

Julianne did the same. “I will remain silent, so can I come with you?” Her voice was more gentle than it had been before entering the carriage. I could feel friendliness and affection from it. Something big must have changed inside her. That made me curious, but now wasn’t the time to investigate. Gwynt’s situation took priority.

“I don’t mind.”

As long as she didn’t hinder me, another spectator wasn’t going to be a problem. In fact, I should stop wasting time or an irremediable rift might open between Gwynt and my soldiers. *Can’t even travel in peace. There’s always a problem,* I thought as I came down the carriage and went where the soldiers had gathered.

“What’s happening?!” I shouted in a commanding tone befitting of a feudal lord.

They hadn’t expected me to come and turned toward me, their faces full of surprise.

As I silently walked to their center, the ones on my path moved away to let me pass. Then, finally, I saw Gwynt, whom a soldier was grabbing by the collar. Maybe they’d had a scuffle, as Gwynt’s clothes were in disarray and he showed more skin than usual. He looked so dainty that—as much as I didn’t want to admit it—I found him attractive for an instant.

“Why are you doing this?” I asked, my voice trembling from rage.

He had raised his hand against Gwynt, my future comrade. I couldn’t let this end as just a prank. When I released the mana from my mana-storing organs to enhance my physical abilities, the soldiers noticed that I was truly angry.

“Th-There is a good reason!” said the soldier who had been grabbing Gwynt’s collar, finally letting him go.

“Oh, do explain.” I was curious about what kind of excuse he would give.

“He lied, saying that there was a huge monster in the forest around here! He kept insisting on it, so I was scolding him for hindering our work!”

There was no way that Gwynt, the scout character, would make such a mistake. The soldier in front of me must have overlooked it. I had thought that Gwynt had shown enough of his skills in the sewers, but it hadn’t spread to the soldiers who hadn’t gone with me. Behind me, Julianne and Adele were watching me silently. It felt like they were testing me, wanting to see what kind of judgment I would make.

“Gwynt is my guest. Do you still hold that opinion even with that in mind?”

“...Yes.”

It seemed he had the resolve to be punished. I actually liked honest guys like him, but based on how he was making light of Gwynt because of his preconceived notions, he needed to be reeducated. Anyway, executing him for his rudeness toward a guest was...too much. It would make me feel better, but

it would give my soldiers the impression that I didn't listen to them and would worsen my reputation.

"What do you have to say, Gwynt?" I asked, wanting to hear both sides.

"I did not lie," he replied in a strong voice that didn't fit his appearance. He looked straight at me, pleading with me to believe him.

"Is that all?"

"Yes."

"Got it." There wasn't a need to continue the conversation anymore. I turned toward the crowd and announced my conclusion. "Gwynt is an amazing scout, to the point that I tried to recruit him."

The mood changed immediately. The soldier who had been scolding Gwynt paled—if Gwynt was that good, then his warning must have been accurate.

"You should ascertain the truth with your own eyes instead of just quarreling about it."

They were wasting time with this argument. It was just a matter of checking if there was a monster; and if it did exist, then it only needed to be eliminated. As I was their lord, nobody could object.

"Anyway, just take me to wherever Gwynt thinks this monster is."

"It's dangerous! As the person in charge, I shall go with them, so please wait here!" Ludwig was foolish enough to try to stop me. He even proposed to cover for the failure of his subordinate and go himself.

"I'm not weak enough to be killed by a mere monster." It was a great opportunity to get stronger, so I obviously refused.

"Rest assured, I shall go with him," Julianne arbitrarily declared as she walked toward me from behind.

Adele clung to my arm to show that she would come too. They both seemed determined to participate.

"Do as you wish. But no matter what anyone says, I will fight." I didn't want to waste more time on this conversation, so I ignored everyone else and turned

toward Gwynt. “Can you fight too?”

“Of course,” he replied, standing up. However, as he did, the cloth that was like a skirt around his waist fell.

The pants under it had apparently been torn during the squabble—badly enough that I could see flashes of cute pink underwear. I was so exasperated by the fact that an unfortunate erotic event happened at a time like this that I didn’t even feel like throwing a retort.

“P-Please don’t look!” Gwynt yelled and crouched back down. He was blushing furiously with tears in his eyes.

I stretched my hand out to help him back up, but Julianne stopped me.

“Do you intend to humiliate a woman?” She glared at me with sharp eyes, misunderstanding Gwynt’s gender. She wasn’t acting as my fiancée, but as a knight protecting a woman.

For an instant, I thought that it would be fun to keep the comedy going, but it wouldn’t do to have her think worse of me. So I decided to be frank. “He’s a man, you know?”

“Huh?” She let out a dumb voice, her mouth wide open. After a few seconds, she finally understood the meaning of my words and looked at Gwynt in disbelief.

“You can touch his crotch to check if you want. I give you my permission as your fiancé.” I grinned at her, curious to see her reaction.

She looked at me and worried for a few seconds then, finally, stood before Gwynt.

“I only want to know if he speaks the truth. Prepare yourself!”

“N-No! Help me!” Gwynt tried to flee, but Julianne jumped at him and restrained him. She pressed down on his struggling limbs and thrust her hand at his crotch.

“There truly is something...” Julianne muttered as she took her hand from his pants and stared at it, ascertaining the sensation of the thing she had touched.

Everyone couldn’t help but feel pity for Gwynt, who, for his part, was hiding

his face in his hands in shame.

After Gwynt had changed, we entered the forest and followed the traces of the monster. We formed a line of Gwynt, Laurentz (the soldier who had quarreled with Gwynt), Ludwig, me, Adele, and Julianne. The rest had stayed around the carriage to protect it.

The footprints were bigger than human feet, which confirmed that it was a huge monster. Laurentz had no other choice but to admit he had been wrong.

“But why is there such a monster here?” Laurentz let out in astonishment.

I understood his shock. We were far from Fourth Village, and such a huge monster had never appeared around here before. Maybe the adventurers had missed it and it had fled here from the village? Or maybe it was because the Verdant Wind was no longer in the area? In the case of the latter, it was possible that similar things were happening in other places and I just didn’t know about them. If I didn’t bolster the domain’s defenses, it might fall to monsters in the future.

Should I recruit more soldiers? Or ask for help from my liege-lord and the Adventurer Guild? No matter what I chose, I would need money. *To think I still need to worry about lacking funds even after becoming a noble.*

“I found it.” Gwynt stopped and turned toward me.

“Where is it?”

I glanced where Gwynt was pointing his finger and found a three-meter-tall, green-skinned, man-eating demon—an ogre. Its entire body bulged with muscles and it wielded a halberd, likely stolen from someone. It looked small in the ogre’s hand, but it was around two meters long.

“What should we do?”

“We kill it,” I answered immediately.

Ogres were stronger than lizardmen. No villager would be able to stop an ogre attack. Letting it go meant accepting the destruction of a village, which would end up in the economic collapse of the Girard territory. There was no

way I could leave it alone.

“Then do you mind if I take care of it?” Julianne suggested while touching her neck. Maybe her scar was throbbing? It came from an ogre after all.

“No, we’re all going together.”

It was too risky for someone to go alone. Moreover, if I wanted to strengthen my mana-storing organs, I couldn’t just stay in a safe place and watch it being defeated.

“But this is a dangerous opponent.”

“I know. That’s why we’ll fight it together.” I didn’t want to waste time convincing her. It would be a pain if the ogre noticed us before we finished our preparations, so I ignored her and gave my orders. “I’ll fight it head-on with Adele. Everyone else, you wait for an opening, then attack.”

“P-Please wait! You intend to act as a decoy, Baron Girard?” Julianne asked, flustered.

She was probably thinking that I was crazy for wanting to have the most dangerous role. It wasn’t as if I liked the danger—only that I needed more combat experience and had to get stronger if I wanted to be able to face Seravimia.

“Of course. And I don’t accept objections.”

I turned toward Adele. She had drawn her crimson twin swords and was ready to fight. She was smiling, likely because she was glad to fight together with me.

“Let’s go.” I drew my dual blades and leaped forward. I heard voices behind telling me to stop, but I ignored them. I wasn’t going to be a simple bystander. I released all the power of my mana-storing organs and increased my physical abilities. “Look at me!” I shouted, drawing the ogre’s attention.

It broke into a freakishly wide smile and swung down its halberd at me. I stopped and used my blades to ward off the axe part of its weapon, which smashed into the ground a few centimeters from my feet, leaving a big crater.

“Adele!”

“Yes!”

We hadn’t even planned anything beforehand, and yet Adele had immediately understood my aim. She ran along the halberd’s shaft and thrust her swords at the ogre’s eyes.

The monster roared. Not only was that enough to stop Adele, but it even blew her away, making her crash into a tree.

It created a damn shock wave!

Normal ogres couldn’t do that, so that meant this was a unique monster with a special ability. That was likely how it had survived and reached here in the first place.

I was certain Adele was alive, but she wouldn’t be able to get back to the fight for a while. Which meant I had to deal with it alone!

The ogre launched a front kick at me, so I dodged to the side and cut at its leg with my swords. However, while I managed to tear its skin, its muscles stopped my blades from going further. I tried to take some distance, but the ogre swung its halberd horizontally, so I jumped to avoid it. However, it had known that I would do that and be wide open in the air, and it threw a punch at me. I hurriedly warded off the trajectory of its fist with my swords and used magic.

“Shadow Sleep.”

My spell created a dark cloud around the monster’s head to put it to sleep. It resisted the magic and stayed awake, but that had been enough to jumble its consciousness and stop it in its tracks for a few moments.

Gwynt didn’t miss the opportunity and jumped from a tree with his sword held in a reverse-grip. He stabbed it in the ogre’s back, though only up to around a quarter of the blade’s length. Even the combination of Gwynt’s weight and the momentum from his fall hadn’t been enough to pierce through the monster’s armor of muscles.

“Raaagh!” it roared in pain and rage.

Gwynt didn’t have the time to get away and was blown off by the shock wave. The ogre then took the sword stuck on its back and threw it at me. It was as fast as a bullet, but I managed to block it with my blades. However, the impact was so violent that I lost strength in my arms from the pain and they fell, uselessly,

to my sides.

The monster bellowed once again and charged at me. I was going to stop it with a spell, but Julianne suddenly appeared, thrusting her spear at the ogre's flank, piercing its thick muscles and reaching its organs. It seemed Julianne was pretty strong.

Then Ludwig and Laurentz slashed at the monster's arm from the other side. They, however, were stymied by its muscular armor as well and didn't do much damage.

"Master Jack! Are you all right?!" Ludwig shouted my way.

Idiot! Don't look away from it!

Enraged by the gnats slowing it down, the ogre swung its arm, blowing Ludwig and Laurentz away. As for Julianne, she twisted her spear to widen the wound inside the monster.

"Gyaaaah!" For the first time since the start of the battle, it stopped moving from the pain and glared hatefully at Julianne. Then it grabbed the spear's shaft to prevent her from moving, drew its face near hers, and opened its mouth wide.

If it emitted a shock wave at this distance, Julianne wouldn't only be blown away—her brain and her organs would be severely damaged. Having her mana-storing organs destroyed would mean that she wouldn't be able to fight anymore.

I remembered what she had said at the mansion: *"As long as you let me live as a knight, I do not wish for anything else."*

To her, someone for whom fighting was everything, the loss of her mana-storing organs was the same as death. I didn't particularly like her, and my plan to live separately hadn't changed. However, it would be a shame to lose a warrior...no, a *knight* strong enough to pierce an ogre's thick muscles.

Basically, what I meant to say was that what I was going to do was for my self-interest. It wasn't because of anything as ambiguous as being good and virtuous!

“Shadow Bind.”

My shadow stretched and covered the ogre’s mouth just before it released the shock wave. The shadow was immediately torn apart, but it had been enough to weaken the attack’s intensity and, while Julianne was blown away and riddled with injuries, she was still conscious.

I strengthened my physical abilities to their limits and rushed forward. The ogre was thrusting its halberd at her, but she was too hurt to avoid it.

I roared as I swung my twin swords with all my strength. I aimed at the cut Ludwig had made and slashed through the monster’s arm, breaking its bone. It resisted, but I managed to sever the arm entirely, and the limb fell to the ground with the halberd still in its hand.

“Are you all right?” I asked Julianne, standing in front of her to protect her. Because I overdid it with my strengthening, my whole body hurt, making it hard for me to move. I wasn’t in a state to fight anymore.

“Y-Yes. Thank you for saving me.”

“Good. Thanks to you guys, we’ve bought enough time. We’ve won this battle.”

The ogre used its remaining arm to extract the spear from its flank.

“Baron Girard! Do not mind me and run away!”

She was injured and couldn’t move, and yet she still worried about me. She was good-natured. While she might not be a character from the game, she could become a great ally. Just for that, it was worth getting engaged to her.

“Don’t worry. I told you, we’ve won.”

“Huh?” She let out a dumb voice as I didn’t move even though the ogre was aiming the spear at me.

“Don’t you dare lay a hand on Master Jack!”

Adele, who had been blown away first, repelled the spear and used the ogre’s knee as a stool to jump. She landed on its shoulders, took both of her swords in reverse-grip, then stabbed them into the crown of its head. They pierced through its hard skull and reached its brain. Blood flowed from the monster’s

eyes and nose as it stopped moving, its arm drooping, before falling on its back.

Adele had jumped off its shoulders before it fell and was now in front of me.

“Good job.” I wanted to pat her head, but I couldn’t move my arms. My swords dropped from my hands and stabbed into the ground.

“Are you all right, Master Jack?”

“I just need to rest a little.”

Adele supported my body before I could collapse and gently helped me to sit on the ground.

“You two are very close,” Julianne commented spontaneously as she watched us.

Maybe I got a little too intimate with another woman in front of my fiancée? I should make an effort to keep the facade in public, at least, I reflected a little.

“Naturally. After all, Master Jack is my pupil, my principal, and my dear master,” Adele boasted. It sounded slightly provocative, but she had only stated facts, so she wasn’t wrong.

I had thought Julianne wouldn’t mind, as she had only become my fiancée for her family, but she unexpectedly looked a little sad.

“I’m fine, so go check on Gwynt.”

“Yes!” Adele answered vigorously and ran off.

The next ones to come were Ludwig and Laurentz. I had been a little concerned, considering they had been blown away by the ogre, but it seemed they had only suffered minor injuries. As they were healthy enough, I gave them new orders.

“Go look around to see if there are any other monsters nearby! If you find one, inform me immediately!”

“Yes, sir,” Ludwig replied with a hand on his chest, then he went to patrol around with Laurentz.

Now, Julianne and I were left alone with the ogre’s corpse. She was watching me, unmoving and silent.

“Is there anything you want to say?” I asked.

“...Thank you very much.”

Hm? Why is she thanking me? “Don’t worry about it.”

I approached the ogre’s corpse to pick up her spear. The monster was lying on the ground with green blood flowing from its wounds. Unlike the lesser earth dragon, there was nothing that could be used as material from its body. Its skin was just a little tough, and now that it was dead, its hard muscles weren’t that different from those of humans. You couldn’t use their tendons for bowstrings either, because they weren’t flexible enough.

Basically, an ogre was just annoying: a pain while alive, and worthless when dead.

Anyway, I crouched and picked up the spear. It was quite heavy. For a woman’s slender arms to be able to wield it, she needed well-trained mana-storing organs. However, while Julianne’s strength to be able to pierce through the ogre’s muscles was quite attractive, that wasn’t her main appeal. No, the best thing was that she wasn’t a character from the game.

Being the game’s creator, Seravimia knew the combat style of the game’s characters such as myself, Adele, or Gwynt, and she could easily take measures against us. But Julianne didn’t appear in the game, so Seravimia shouldn’t know her. She could become my hidden ace. If I trained her well and she could acquire some kind of special skill, she would become an important asset for defeating Seravimia.

“Think you have enough strength to carry it?”

I held the spear out to Julianne. Now that I understood she could become an important ally against Seravimia, I decided to be kinder to her.

“Thank you.” She grasped the spear’s shaft. But, at the same time, she touched my hand. “Ah.” She hurriedly withdrew her hand and blushed, caressing the finger that had touched me.

What’s her problem?

“You can’t?”

“Excuse me.” She snatched the spear from my hand. “I shall head back first!”

“O-Okay,” I reflexively replied, surprised by her sudden vigor, and she ran off with astounding speed.

Didn’t even get the time to ask her about her injuries. I wonder why she was in such a hurry she had to strengthen herself with mana... Bathroom break?

* * *

After running around for a while and making sure nobody was nearby, I finally stopped. I still felt the heat from the finger that had touched Baron Girard’s hand.

“You can become stronger, Julianne.” My father had often told me that. He believed in my talent and had trained me since my childhood. It was because I had such an upbringing that I admired knights and went through severe training. Of course, I also had an abundance of combat experience and had gone through situations frightening enough to make me wet myself more than once. So I always thought that I didn’t need a man and would just live separately from him if I ever got engaged. And yet...

“His back was so large...”

When I had been on the verge of being attacked by the ogre, Baron Girard had saved me without caring about the danger. If he had taken the attitude of someone rescuing a helpless woman I would have been angry, but I was certain he had been helping me as a warrior.

The image of a married couple fighting together, entrusting their backs to each other, flashed through my mind. I had never thought about it before, but somehow, it felt right to me. The way he was a little forceful—not to mention his stern gaze—was quite attractive too. Could he actually be the best husband ever?!

The instant I had thought that, I had started to see him as a man and couldn’t find my words anymore, so I’d run away.

What should I do?! I never thought I was the kind of woman to fall in love so easily. I don’t know how to control these new feelings. How am I even supposed to face him from now on...?

As I was swinging my spear around out of embarrassment, Adele, who should have been checking on Gwynt, appeared in front of me. She glared at me sharply, and she reminded me of a dog with raised hackles.

A switch flipped inside me, and I shifted to battle mode. “What about the task Baron Girard gave you?”

“I’m done with it.”

That wasn’t the right tone she should take when speaking to her master’s fiancée, and she wasn’t even trying to hide her hostility toward me. She didn’t need to put her feelings into words for me to understand them.

“Then why didn’t you get back to your beloved master?” I felt a sting in my chest saying this, but I ignored it for now.

“What is your objective, Julianne?”

“To make House Froid a true aristocratic family.”

I personally didn’t mind staying a commoner, but my mother really wanted this, which led to asking a lot of nobles until finally arriving at Baron Girard. That was all there was to it. That was all there *should* be to it, and yet...

“That’s your house’s objective, not yours.”

“I... I...”

What did *I* want to do? I got engaged to Baron Girard because my father forced me to. But now, it was different. I wanted to be with him.

“What are you thinking about?”

I was almost certain that, if I didn’t give Adele an appropriate answer, she would cut me down with her twin swords. Of course, I wouldn’t lose without a fight. But she was strong. Stronger than my father. I couldn’t win with my current strength.

“I want to be a good wife and help Baron Girard with my spear.”

Surely that was the wrong answer for a noble wife whose job was to birth an heir, make connections with other noble wives, and support her husband. However, I didn’t intend to let go of the spear in my hand. I didn’t want to die

lying on a bed—but on the battlefield instead. That was why I wanted to help Baron Girard with my strength.

“With your spear... You’re like me.” The pressure she exuded vanished, but she kept a stern expression.

I guess I passed her test?

“Well then, let’s help Baron Girard—no, my husband, together.”

“I refuse. I can handle that on my own.” She glared at me one last time and left, surely heading to my husband. I was envious of how she could go to him so casually and without reserve. It made me a little jealous.



Interlude: Ser Yon’s Dilemma

I straddled my trusty horse, who had accompanied me through all the battlefields I had been on ever since I had become a knight, and was sent off by the butler, Kevin, as I headed back for the Dulac territory. I had left our luggage for Julianne at Baron Girard’s mansion and only took my usual equipment with me: a short spear, a shield, and my armor.

It had been a while since I had traveled alone, and I enjoyed the sense of freedom.

“With this, I have done my last job as her father.”

Julianne was similar to me and liked to fight. So when she got her scar, I had thought she would never manage to get married and never expected her to become a baron’s wife. I felt like a weight had been lifted from my shoulders. Now, Julianne wouldn’t stay a commoner and would become an aristocrat, which should please my wife, Hilde. The next step was for them to love and support each other, but Julianne didn’t know that kind of love, so it might be difficult for her. Though considering how Baron Girard was resourceful enough to restore his tattered domain, he might be able to do something about it. After all, even from my point of view I found him to be an attractive and fascinating man, so I couldn’t help but hold such expectations.

“Hm? Those cavalrymen are...”

I was still in the Girard territory, and yet I’d found three people in some familiar outfits. They were wearing silver helmets so polished that they reflected the sunlight, so I couldn’t see their faces, but I was certain that they were Baron Dulac’s soldiers. They were coming my way on their horses, and seeing as they were looking at me, it probably wasn’t a coincidence.

My instinct as a knight told me that a plot was brewing and that my daughter was in danger.

“Hey there, Ser Yon.”

“That voice... Is that you, Young Master Matteo?”

“Indeed.” The man before me removed his helmet, revealing the face of Baron Dulac’s son.

Baron Dulac wasn’t blessed with children, and Young Master Matteo was his only son. He had been raised with great care, but once he had awakened to the joy of fighting he had started to participate in conflicts more and more, gaining experience and becoming stronger. He was very talented, and I knew he would surpass me in a few years—that made me look forward to the future.

I descended from my horse, stabbed my short spear in the ground, and put a hand on my chest in a salute. “Did you have some business in the Girard domain? You should have told me; I would have come to welcome you,” I said. The bad feeling I had worsened.

Since Baron Dulac became the head of his house, he had been trying to expand his territory using various means. He was very ambitious, and there was no way he would send his precious son here without a reason. I didn’t know what he wanted me to do, but I was certain that I would not like it. Even though war was my sole domain of expertise, I could predict that much.

“The order was urgent, so you needn’t worry about that,” he replied.

“Is it a special order?”

“Indeed. Here are Baron Dulac’s words; listen carefully.” Young Master Matteo took a parchment from the cloth bag at his waist and read aloud. “Ser Yon, you shall go to Fourth Village in the Girard territory and join the Welza Company that is staying there. Then, you shall assassinate Baron Girard.”

I gasped. Julianne had finally found someone who could make her happy, and I had to kill him? I felt so angry that I couldn’t stop my body from trembling. Was that how he treated a knight who had served him diligently for years? By involving my precious daughter in his schemes?!

“Hm? What is your answer, ser?” Young Master Matteo crossed his arms and urged me to accept. I could see from his attitude that he thought there was no way I would refuse.

“Baron Girard has become my daughter’s fiancé. Why is there a need to assassinate him? Please, tell me the motive.”

“I have no obligation to explain it to you. You just need to do as ordered.”

I stayed silent. I had hoped for him to tell me that if I didn’t do it, the Dulac territory would be in danger or something similar, but he didn’t even deign to give me an explanation. It seemed that the rumor I had heard about how Baron Girard was targeted by various nobles, including my lord, was true. Baron Dulac likely thought of Julianne’s engagement only as a tool to put Baron Girard off guard.

“Now, answer me. Don’t tell me you have forgotten your debt to Baron Dulac?”

The debt in question was that he had saved my wife. Back when I had just married her, Hilde had fallen ill, and the doctor had told us that she would die if she didn’t get special medicine. However, I could not afford it as a mere knight, and I had fallen into despair. It was then that Baron Dulac appeared and bought it for us.

After seeing Hilde overcome her illness and regain her health, I had sworn that I would follow Baron Dulac no matter what. And I never forgot that pledge. I was willing to risk my life for him to repay the favor—be it as a knight or as a husband.

“I have not forgotten his favor in giving us that medicine.”

“Then you can do this, right?” Young Master Matteo approached me and tapped my shoulder. Then he drew his face close to mine, and I could feel from the pressure he exuded that he wouldn’t allow me to escape. “The guys from the Welza Company will assault Baron Girard from the front, so you just need to attack him from behind. Isn’t that a simple job?”

I was torn between Julianne’s happiness and my debt to Baron Dulac. If I refused, Hilde and I would be punished. As for Julianne, her fate depended on Baron Girard. I could hope for him to protect her, but the chances he would do so were low. He had only just met her, so if she became a hindrance to him, he would likely abandon her.

So accepting this order wasn’t only to repay the favor, but to protect my family too. I was a failure as a father, but it was the right choice to protect my family. But if there was a way for everyone to be happy—

“Just answer me already!” Young Master Matteo had grown impatient with me.

I had no other choice but to give my reply. It might cause sorrow to Julianne, but I decided to accept the mission.

“I would never betray Baron Dulac. I shall accomplish this task without fail.”

“Well said!” He smiled and clapped my shoulder once again before stepping away. He put the decree back in his cloth bag and took out another parchment. “This is where the guys from the Welza Company are hiding. Don’t get lost on the way.”

“Understood.”

Young Master Matteo handed me the map, then departed with the other two soldiers. The fact that they didn’t keep watch on me proved that I was trusted. That would normally delight me, but right now, I was just depressed.

“I wanted to see Julianne be happy...” I voiced a now impossible dream out loud to banish my regrets. Then I mounted my horse and strayed from the highway. After a while, I abandoned my partner and entered the forest, walking through a trackless path toward my destination.

It wasn’t easy to get the map of another domain. Considering all the time and money that must have gone into it, Baron Dulac was serious, and I had a hunch that the fight between him and Baron Girard wouldn’t end before one of them was destroyed.

Chapter 4: Gwynt's Grandfather

The trip after defeating the ogre was peaceful, and together with Adele, Gwynt, Julianne, and around thirty soldiers, I safely arrived at Fourth Village. The situation seemed to be worse than I had expected, as I could see the grim expressions of the villagers through the window of my carriage. A few buildings were half destroyed, and the corpses of adventurers were lined up in front of the church. If we had arrived here a few days later, the village might have been totally annihilated.

"To think the situation would be so terrible..." Julianne muttered sadly. It was the first thing she had said since returning to the carriage.

As she had been fighting monsters for a while, she must have encountered quite a few tragedies. The fact that she felt sad about the scene in front of us showed that she still retained her sensitivity and humanity.

"I did deploy adventurers to help, but it seems they only managed to buy us a little time."

If there was someone to hate in this situation, it'd be Seravimia. If she hadn't taken the Verdant Wind sisters, there wouldn't have been so much damage, as proven by the game. Seravimia's actions had a bigger influence than I had originally anticipated. My territory needed to gain strength quickly before it was entirely destroyed.

"I-I see..." Julianne glanced at me, blushed, then looked away immediately.

She's fallen for me—as if. After all, no woman would fall in love just because you'd fought alongside her once. She was likely just a little nervous because she was alone with an unfamiliar man.

"I'm going to meet the village chief to confirm the extent of the damage, and Ludwig will join the adventurers to come up with a defense strategy. What about you, Julianne?"

She hadn't been part of my plans, so I didn't know what to do with her. She was strong enough to defend herself even if I let her roam around the village, so

I decided to let her choose what she would do.

“We are going to be here for some time, so I would like to look around the village a little. Is that all right?”

I liked how submissive she was, asking for my permission. My opinion of her just kept getting better and better, and she was nearing the top of the list of people that weren’t likely to betray me.

“Of course. The soldiers I’m lending you are familiar with Fourth Village, so if there’s anything you want to know, don’t hesitate to ask them.”

“Thank you for your consideration.”

The carriage stopped just as we finished our not-very-engaged-couple-like conversation. The soldier acting as the coachman opened the door and we got off in front of the village chief’s house, greeted by the putrid stench of blood.

“Where is that smell coming from?” I asked.

“Most likely from the monster corpses that have been gathered nearby.”

They still hadn’t taken care of the bodies? They must really be short of hands. “Tell Ludwig to order the soldiers to take care of them.”

“Understood.”

While I was at it, I gave a few other instructions to the soldier. “Julianne wants to look around the village, so have Adele and the soldiers I’ve assigned to her guide her. As for Gwynt, he can do as he likes. Got it?”

“I shall convey your words without fail.”

“I’m counting on you.”

There. Now everyone could handle themselves while I figured out the situation.

I saw Julianne off and entered the village head’s house. I could see a large room from the entranceway; inside were an old man with a bent back on a chair and a man around thirty next to him. In front of them was a table with a few pieces of parchment—reports, surely—spread atop it. Finally, I noticed a woman with a small child boiling water in a corner of the room.

“Lord Jack! Thank you for deigning to come to such a—”

I stopped the old man—the village chief—from standing up with my hand.

“You have back problems, no? You may remain seated.”

I wasn’t being kind, I just didn’t want to waste time because of a sluggish old man. I walked into the large room.

“I won’t stay long, so I don’t need anything,” I warned the woman, who had been starting to prepare black tea, and turned back to the chief. “The situation seems worse than I’d expected from the report I received. Tell me the current state of affairs.”

“Monsters are attacking almost every day. No villagers were harmed thanks to the adventurers, but I do not think they will last much longer...”

“What kinds of monsters?”

“Mainly goblins, orcs, and green wolves. Occasionally there are ogres and man-eating birds as well.”

While their numbers were a problem, the first three weren’t that strong. However, ogres and man-eating birds were different.

Ogres had thick muscles that acted like armor, so few people were actually able to hurt them. It was impossible for mere villagers, and an adventurer would at least need to be Rank C to put up a decent fight.

As for the man-eating birds, they couldn’t fly, but they were fast and could stab with their beaks. They were strong enough to easily pierce through steel and shave off stone walls. What’s more, their soft plumage made it difficult to cut them with edged weapons, so low-ranked adventurers and ordinary soldiers couldn’t do anything against them. They were seriously annoying.

“Do they always appear from the same place?”

“We could only confirm that they come from the forest. A hunter was sent to scout it, but he never came back. That is all we know.”

If they came from the forest, that meant that it was like in the side quest. Unfortunately, if that was the case, that also meant that there wasn’t an actual reason for the assault. The monsters had only overflowed from the forest

because there were too many of them—it was as simple as that. So the only thing we could do was to endure their assaults until the herd began to thin. It might take a while for the situation to be resolved.

"I got the gist. Leave the rest to me."

The original Jack would have told them to manage on their own, but I wasn't like him. If I abandoned them, they could revolt, or Seravimia might return. I needed to act in a way that made them think that I was a good lord who deserved his taxes. I could only act selfishly after the danger had passed.

"Most of my soldiers will defend the village while a small elite troop will go investigate the forest." We should only need to endure for a month before the monsters stopped appearing. I only wanted to check the forest to be certain it was the same as it was in the game. "I also brought some food. I'll order my soldiers to distribute it to the villagers, so make sure everyone gets their share."

I had thought that would be necessary after reading the report. Just in case, I pressured him so that he and other influential people wouldn't monopolize the food.

"Naturally."

"Good. We're done, then."

I exited the chief's house and walked around the village in search of Ludwig. Thinking he might be where the monster corpses were being disposed of, I headed for the village's outskirts.

"Lord Girard!" a voice suddenly called—Gwynt. I turned back and found him running my way, his shoulder-length hair swaying from the motion.

Good, that saves me some time. And it doesn't seem like he's bringing bad news.

"What's happened?" I asked him as he stopped in front of me, out of breath.

"I found my grandfather!"

...What? The side quest completed itself?! That was impossible in the game, so that was most likely also one of the effects of this world now being reality.

"Where was he?"

“He injured his leg, so he has been resting in the building used for treatment.”

It shouldn’t be a fatal injury, but I should go see him just in case. I could search for Ludwig after that. “Show me the way.”

“Yes!” he answered cheerfully and started walking. Maybe it was because he had found his grandfather, but he just kept smiling.

Even from behind he looks like a girl. Such a worthless thought went through my mind as we arrived at the building where the injured had been gathered. Adventurers with severe wounds were lying on the floor, groaning in pain. The place stunk of blood, making it very unpleasant.

“He is upstairs.” Gwynt didn’t mind the stench and continued onward into the building, but I first covered my nose with my hand before following after him.

The building wasn’t particularly large, so the five people lying on the ground were enough to barely leave room to walk. Looking at them, I figured that the patients here would need at least fourth-grade...no, third-grade potions to be healed. House Girard didn’t have those kinds of pricy potions, so only suffering and death were awaiting the adventurers on this floor.

I turned back to Gwynt and noticed him going upstairs. I sent one last look to the adventurers—who seemed like they would soon die from blood loss—and followed after him.

Upstairs, I found five more injured people with bandages on their arms or legs having a friendly chat while sitting on the floor. I figured that the first floor was for the severely wounded, and the second floor was for people less horribly injured. There was only one old man among the five, so he was likely Gwynt’s grandfather.

“Grandpa, Baron Girard is here to see you!” Gwynt pointed at me and his grandfather’s gaze met mine.

“Is your injury all right?” I had hesitated about what to say, but with Gwynt next to me, I decided to show some consideration.

“Oh my. You are so kind, my lord.”

I felt like his reply was a little sarcastic, but I didn’t complain. He was Gwynt’s

relative, so I tolerated it. As long as he didn't go too far, I would allow some rudeness.

"I was only struck by the blunt sword of a goblin," he continued. "I will heal soon."

"You didn't break any bones?"

"It hurts, but I can move it without a problem." He raised his bandaged leg to demonstrate.

I was relieved to learn that it wasn't a fatal injury. "So, why are you here?"

Gwynt and his grandfather were commoners living in the town where my mansion was. Considering how troublesome it must be for an old man to travel all the way to Fourth Village, he must have had a reason for coming here.

"My late wife and Gwynt's parents were from Fourth Village. When I heard that my family's birthplace was in danger, I had to come and check."

Gwynt's grandmother and his parents were already dead. The cause was malnutrition from a food shortage. If not for House Girard, they might still be alive.

"Do you hate me?" I couldn't help but ask. I was unusually tense, and my throat felt dry. If he showed any hostility, I would have to kill him to keep the seed of revolt from budding.

"...The one I hate is your father, not you. You have been doing your best for this domain."

It seemed that lowering taxes and saving Third Village had raised his opinion of me. He hadn't entirely let go of his grudge, but it shouldn't be a problem for now, and I shouldn't need to dispose of him in fear of betrayal. I was only restoring the territory to live in luxury later, but I had no reason to correct his convenient misunderstanding. "Then I have nothing more to say."

With the conversation over, I turned toward Gwynt. I couldn't feel any hostility from him, nor did he seem to hold a grudge against me. It didn't seem like a new quest would start either, so I could assume that the side quest to make Gwynt my ally was completed.

“We’ve found your grandfather, and your late parents’ birthplace is in danger. What are you going to do, Gwynt?”

“I will protect the village with all I have,” he replied with a strong, determined voice.

I had thought the same during the battle against the lesser earth dragon, but people who had resolved themselves were strong. Even in a crisis, they didn’t flee and bravely stood their ground. They shared bonds of solidarity—comrades in arms who had overcome great trials together.

“Well said.” I tapped him on the shoulder. It wasn’t muscled but round and slender. For some reason, I felt a sudden urge to assault him. “I’m planning to create a small elite group with me at its center to investigate the reason behind the monster assaults. I hope you’ll work as our scout.” I spoke quickly to hide my agitation.

“Please leave it to me!”

My heart started to beat faster from seeing Gwynt’s smile from so close. Of course, it wasn’t the feeling of falling in love, but closer to the notion of being happy that a pretty woman had smiled at me. I couldn’t help but be perplexed at how often I was destabilized around Gwynt.

I shook my head a few times to shake off these weird thoughts and started to head toward the stairs to leave.

“Lord Girard,” Gwynt’s grandfather called, and I turned back. He endured the pain and used the wall as a support to stand. “Please take care of my grandson.” He bowed deeply.

You’re asking me to protect him in your place because you’re powerless? Tch, I don’t like that. Why do you even trust me? I’m the head of the notorious House Girard! We’ve only met a few minutes ago. That wasn’t even a long enough conversation to be a job interview—how could you even know what kind of person I am? And yet, you’re entrusting your important grandson to me?! It’s basically gambling!

“We can’t know what will happen on the battlefield. I can’t make any promises.”

Still, he continued to bow, as if saying he was well aware of that but still counted on me. Well, Gwynt was watching, so I decided to give a little freebie.

“However, no matter what happens, I’ll never abandon him. When Gwynt dies, I die too.”

I hated betrayals. I would never forgive someone who betrayed me, but inversely, I didn’t want to be the one doing the betraying either. So if Gwynt ever was surrounded by monsters and on the verge of dying, then I would save him. I was resolved to do that much.

“Thank you very much.” I couldn’t see his face, but I felt like he was crying.

At any rate, that pain of a conversation was finally over. “Let’s go, Gwynt.”

“Y-Yes!”

We descended the stairs and exited the building.

As we walked, I noticed that while the mood of the village was still grim, it seemed that the efforts of my soldiers had somehow improved it.

“What are you planning to do, Lord Girard?”

“We’re going to be comrades fighting together. Call me by my first name.”

“Eh? Ah, yes!”

I wanted him to serve me after that, so I allowed him to call me by my first name to reduce the psychological distance between us.

“As for your question, I’m going to make a group to go explore the forest. The members will be... Oh, good timing.”

I noticed Ludwig coming our way. I waited for him to arrive in front of me and salute before addressing him. “How is the disposal of the monsters’ corpses going?”

“It should finish today.”

“When you’re done, have everyone cooperate with the adventurers to protect the village.”

“Yes, sir! What about you, Master Jack?”

“I’m taking Adele and Gwynt with me into the forest.”

“...Huh?” Ludwig let out a dumb voice in shock even though I’d expected his usual obedient reply. “Wh-What are you saying?! That’s dangerous!”

“Tell me something I don’t know. Staying on the defensive will only lead to more damage, so we have to find the cause.”

“Then I shall do it! Please stay somewhere safe!”

“Or what? Kevin will get mad at you?”

“...Yes.”

Even after getting promoted to captain, he still couldn’t go against Kevin. In that case, it should be the same for the other soldiers. For them to be more concerned about Kevin’s temper than mine was dangerous. I would need to reeducate them about who their master was, but it would have to wait until after this problem was solved.

“I’ll explain everything to Kevin after we return. For now, focus on your current job.”

“Yes.” He gave a simple reply, but I didn’t feel like chiding him when I saw how dejected he was.

Anyway, I still had a lot of things to do, so I resumed my search for Adele and Julianne.

I walked through Fourth Village with Gwynt.

When we neared the forest, I saw a dozen adventurers eating on the ground. They were likely taking a lunch break in between monster attacks. The fact they were focused on eating and were entirely silent showed how harsh the situation was. They were exhausted from the constant battles day and night.

As I was thinking that they would reach their limits soon, I noticed a woman who stood out because of her silver hair. Next to her were Adele and two soldiers serving as guards-cum-monitors. Just as I had expected, Julianne had come to observe where the fighting occurred.

“There you are,” I called out.

The first one to react was Adele. She turned back, saw me, then ran my way to hug me, but I stopped her with my hand. Flirting with a woman in front of the adventurers who were risking their lives against the monsters would give the worst impression. That might even make them give up on their jobs, so I had to make them think I was a diligent lord.

“Did monsters show up?” I asked.

“A few goblins and green wolves appeared, but I slew them!”

Her expression was screaming “Praise me!” so I patted her head. That much shouldn’t earn the envy of the men.

“The situation is more dire than expected. What do you intend to do from here on...Dear?” Julianne approached next.

As people were watching us, I didn’t point out the fact Julianne had changed the way she addressed me and ignored how Adele’s mood was worsening.

“I want to explore the forest to find the cause of the attacks.” I turned toward Adele. “Stop guarding Julianne and come with me, Adele.”

“Yes!” she answered happily and started to walk out toward the forest, so I pulled on her clothes to stop her.

“Don’t be in such a hurry. Gwynt is our scout and will be the vanguard.”

If we were in the plains it would be fine, but in the forest, where our view was obstructed, we might get surrounded before we could notice and end up in a dire situation. In fact, if you didn’t have a scout in your party in the game, surprise attacks would happen quite often. We had to stay vigilant.

Adele would never disobey me, so while she was a little dejected, she agreed to my decision.

“May I come with you?” Julianne asked. She didn’t meet my gaze and was fidgeting with her hands, but I knew that she was serious. Her condition for our engagement was to be allowed to fight, so I couldn’t refuse.

“Why not. Yes, you can.”

Julianne smiled brightly, but her guards grimaced. They didn’t want to enter a forest full of monsters. Well, they would be a hindrance anyway, so I figured I

should have them do something else.

"You two go to Ludwig and help the other soldiers to protect the village."

They happily saluted with their hands on their chests.

Come on, you're way too obvious... Your lord is going into a dangerous forest. You should be a little less happy about that.

"As ordered, we shall rejoin Captain Ludwig!"

They didn't even wait for my answer and ran off toward the center of the village. They likely had thought that they should flee before I changed my mind. I did think that they weren't very loyal, but there would be no end to it if I asked for too much, so I should just be happy that they didn't look like they would betray me.

"Buoooh!"

Just when I thought that we would be able to head out, five bipedal pigs—orcs—appeared from the forest.

Jeez, give me a break.

Each orc wielded either an axe, a sword, or a spear. Their pig snouts twitched as they smelled something, and they turned toward Julianne and Adele.

Ah, yeah, they're also the kind of monsters that like human women. I remembered that there was a 15+ rated illustration when you lost against them.

"We'll fight, so rest," I said to the adventurers before they could stand. The plan was to motivate them by having their lord fight in front of them.

I rushed forward and an orc thrust its spear at me, so I jumped and stabbed my twin swords in its head. I kicked its body to take some distance and the other orcs rushed just where I had been. They were now conveniently all gathered together, so I switched to magic.

"Shadow Bind."

With them bound, Julianne thrust at one with her spear and Adele cut down another with her dual blades. Gwynt tried to help too, but I stopped him.

“Stay on the lookout for other monsters.”

The adventurers were so exhausted because the monsters always attacked in waves. Other monsters could notice the noise from our battle and come investigating, so I wanted Gwynt to focus on watching out for our surroundings.

I concentrated back on the fight with the orcs. Adele and Julianne were competing with each other and made short work of the monsters.

“I killed them!” Adele boasted with blood on her face.

“I may have made a disgraceful showing against the ogre, but mere orcs are no match for me!” Julianne appealed.

I was glad they did their best for me, but competing like this could be dangerous. If it went too far, they might even hinder each other.

“I know you two are strong, so calm down.” I tried to soothe them even if it wouldn’t solve the problem.

However, just as I was approaching them, Gwynt shouted. “A man-eating bird is coming this way!”

As I’d feared, another monster appeared.

The man-eating bird sang toward the sky. If I had to describe its appearance in the simplest way possible, it was essentially a giant rooster without a cockscomb. While it was around three meters tall, it was still a size or two smaller than a lesser earth dragon. It was covered in a soft-looking red plumage and only its beak was of a different color—silver.

It ran toward me, but it was only as fast as a human—or so I thought until it suddenly accelerated, messing up the timing of my counterattack. It attacked me with its beak and I blocked it with my twin blades. I felt a violent impact, but it wasn’t as strong as a lesser earth dragon, so I didn’t drop my swords nor lose feeling in my hands as I blocked another three consecutive strikes. The interval between each attack was too short for me to move, so I could only endure without being able to counterattack.

Nonetheless, I wasn’t in a particularly bad situation. I was just doing a wonderful job as a decoy.

“Haaah!” Adele yelled as she strengthened herself with mana and did a high jump, aiming her crimson twin swords at the man-eating bird. The monster’s soft plumage made it hard for blades to hurt it, but it didn’t help it against the strongest character as she cut halfway into its neck. If she had used better weapons, she would have severed its head completely. I really needed to make Adele use the Twin Hydra Blades.

The man-eating bird stopped its assault and rolled around on the ground, crying in pain.

Adele had leapt back off before it could drag her into its fall, and she was now next to me. “Are you all right?”

“Yeah. Thanks for the save.”

I wasn’t sure I would have been able to penetrate its plumage, so she really helped me out there.

As we were waiting for the man-eating bird to stop writhing around, Julianne approached.

“I shall attack next.” She looked fired up as she shot a sharp glare toward the monster. She exuded bloodlust from her whole body, so I didn’t think refusing her wishes would be a good idea.

“Be careful.”

“I shall show you my strength, my dear husband!”

H-Her dear husband...?! Is she laying it on thick because I ignored her calling me “Dear” earlier?!

Adele shot me a horrifying scowl of her own, so I immediately shook my head in denial. I didn’t understand what exactly I was denying, but my instinct told me that it would be very bad if I didn’t.

“Well then, here I go!” Julianne leapt forward while I was still perplexed.

She thrust her spear toward the bird’s eyes after it had finally gotten up. With its neck half-severed, it couldn’t dodge in time, and she pierced straight through its right eye.

Julianne then let go of her spear and drew the sword hanging at her hip. She

paused for a moment, not attacking. She didn't rush for victory and calmly observed the man-eating bird. Maybe it had lost too much blood as it was staggering, looking like it would collapse at any moment. However, it could have a hidden trick—like the lesser earth dragon—so we had to stay on guard. I didn't know if Julianne thought the same, but she jumped on the monster's back and prepared to deal the coup de grâce.

"Haaah!" With a valiant shout, she cut the other side of the wound Adele had made.

A loud thud resounded through the air as the head of the man-eating bird fell to the ground. Blood gushed from its neck like a fountain, dyeing the earth red.

Julianne jumped off the monster's corpse and stared at me silently.

Does she want me to compliment her and tell her she's strong? Wait... Is she competing with Adele? Damn, what an annoying woman. If you want to be praised, just say it. What do you think your mouth is for?

"It seems Ser Yon did a good job. You are strong enough for me to entrust my back to you."

I must have a really good understanding of the woman's heart, because my words worked and Julianne broke out into a satisfied smile.

Adele, on the other hand, looked upset. I had to do something. It was a pain, but these two were important assets against Seravimia, so I couldn't have them in a bad mood.

"Of course, you're strong too, Adele. I'm always relying on you." I patted her head like I would cuddle a dog and she closed her eyes in bliss. *Guess I should continue for a while.*

"Gwynt," I called to get his attention as he was looking out for other monsters. "Go tell Ludwig to send people to collect the man-eating bird's feathers and beak."

"Yes!" He answered with an innocent smile and ran off.

I had wanted him for his scouting abilities, but he might be useful for soothing me too. While he made me feel strange sometimes, it relieved me to have a

harmless man nearby. I was glad to have him as a comrade.

Adele and Julianne glared at each other, but I ignored them and turned toward the adventurers. “All of this thing’s materials are ours. We’re the ones who defeated it, after all.”

Generally, the one who defeated the monster would get its materials. Of course, there were exceptions; for example, if multiple parties cooperated together, or if it was a request from the Adventurer Guild, they would be shared equally among the participants. There was also the possibility for monetary payment instead, but in this case, it wasn’t any of these exceptions.

Likely because they understood I was the lord of the territory, nobody complained and all the materials were mine.

Chapter 5: Fourth Village's Forest

Five of my soldiers arrived, so I left the processing of the man-eating bird to them and we entered the forest.

Gwynt was the vanguard, walking ten meters ahead of us. He used footprints, scratches on trees, and sound to gather information from his surroundings, so we would hinder him if we were too close. This meant that, unfortunately, I ended up in the very uncomfortable position of being sandwiched between Adele and Julianne.

"Are you sure you are not too close to my husband, Adele? It would be hard to fight that way."

"Do not worry. This is the perfect distance for protecting Master Jack. You are not my principal, Lady Julianne, so could you please stay farther away? You are obstructing my duty."

"I am also here to protect my husband, so I am afraid I cannot comply."

They were quarreling over me.

With all I had done, I could understand Adele's longing for me. However, for someone who had been forcefully engaged to me, Julianne's attitude was incomprehensible. I'd rather her to like me than hate me, of course, but it was quite unsettling that I couldn't understand her thought process. The fact that she wasn't a character from the game didn't help, as I couldn't speculate her personality and tastes.

I could only hope that Adele and Julianne's relationship wouldn't deteriorate too much. After all, I didn't want to die because I was involved in a catfight.

"Are you forgetting where we are? If you don't want to die, get serious," I said with a note of anger in my voice.

Adele and Julianne understood that I wasn't joking and cut off their dispute. Adele stopped gluing herself to me and moved behind me, while Julianne took some distance until she was around five meters away. We were finally back to our original formation.

From there, we walked silently to preserve our stamina.

I climbed over a fallen tree and used my dual swords to cut branches out of our way before wiping the sweat on my brow with my sleeve. I had a load on my back—my Twin Hydra Blades, which I had brought in a bag just in case—so I was getting tired more quickly than usual.

I had expected the forest to be overflowing with monsters, but we hadn't encountered a single one so far. I was wondering if it was because of Gwynt's scouting or something else when Gwynt suddenly stopped. Then he thinned his presence and disappeared between the bushes.

"Dear, Gwyn—" Julianne quickly moved next to me, but I stopped her by putting my index finger over her lips. Her face suddenly flushed so hot and red I could almost see it go up in smoke. The situation didn't call for leisurely chitchat, however, so I ignored her reaction and readied my swords while staying on guard until Gwynt came back.

The wind blew, and the trees quivered in the breeze. I became more attentive to the changes around me and started to feel more tense. As I was fearing that a monster might suddenly attack us...someone called my name from behind.

"Lord Jack."

I jumped from the surprise and spun around, finding Gwynt, as feminine-looking as always. I hadn't sensed his presence and he had easily caught me off guard. Not only was he a great scout, but he might also make a good assassin.

"Did you find something?" I feigned calm to not let him know he had startled me.

"I found something that looks like ruins deeper in the forest. What should we do?"

In *Survival Strategies of a Corrupt Aristocrat*, only Fourth Village was used as a field to fight against monsters, and the ruins were only a part of the scenery in the background. Seravimia might know the details about them, but there was no way a mere player like I could. If we could confirm it was a safe zone, we could use the ruins as a place to rest, so I decided we should check them out.

"Gwynt, can you also detect and disarm traps?"

“Naturally.”

“Then let’s go.”

Adele and Julianne didn’t object.

We resumed our walk, and it didn’t take long for us to reach what Gwynt had been referring to. There was a half-destroyed building made of stone with debris scattered around. It must have fallen long ago and been left as is. A giant tree pierced through the ceiling from inside, and the outer walls were partly covered in green moss. It gave such an eerie vibe that I might have been too scared to check inside if we’d discovered this at night.

“Please look at this.” Gwynt crouched and touched the ground.

Curious about what he had found, I got down on my knee and looked closer. “It’s caving a little... Is that a footprint?”

“Yes. Specifically, this is from someone’s shoe.”

“Do you know when it was made?”

“This seems recent. A few hours, or a full day at most.”

Nobody from the village had entered the forest since the monster raid began. The fact that it was a shoeprint meant that this couldn’t be a goblin or orc, so there was an unknown third party in the forest. “That reminds me—we never found the culprit who gave the lesser earth dragon to the lizardmen.”

“There might be an enemy in there,” Gwynt commented.

I heard someone grit their teeth and turned back. Adele was frowning as she bared her teeth. She was likely remembering the fight in Third Village.

I didn’t intend to let the culprit roam free, so we had to thoroughly investigate the ruins.

“Let’s go in.” Nobody objected. “Gwynt, you’re the vanguard. Adele, you take the rear. We’re going to find who is hiding in these ruins.”

Everyone nodded. Gwynt silently took the lead, then I followed him with Julianne, and Adele stayed a few meters behind us looking out for attacks. Thanks to being in a state of high alertness, Adele and Julianne stopped

competing and focused on the task at hand.

Gwynt halted in front of the entrance. He raised his hand and we squatted to hide, watching out for enemies. Gwynt checked the entrance without entering for a while, then he beckoned us over.

“Let’s go.”

Still crouched, we slowly walked over to him. He showed us a thread so thin I had to squint to see it. It was connected to a few small knives on the ground, their blades coated in a black, pungent liquid.

“This is paralyzing poison. This trap was not made to kill, but to capture,” he explained.

So the person who made it wants to catch people alive to be able to torture them for information after that? Damn them! Doing whatever they want in my territory... That does it. Once I find them, I’m crushing them beneath my heel. This is unforgivable.

“We have to explore every corner of these ruins. If you find the intruder, don’t hesitate to kill.” The enemy was cunning and probably pretty strong, so we might not be able to catch them alive and should be prepared for that.

“Understood. I shall go ahead once more, then.” Even knowing about the traps, Gwynt didn’t hesitate to take the lead.

His bravery moved me, but suddenly a black mist came out of him and coiled itself around my body. My arm moved on its own and I touched his cheek. His skin was springy and smooth like an egg. It was just the right temperature, and I could feel the tension draining from my mind. My hand wouldn’t obey me and held on fast.

“Ah?!” Gwynt cried out in surprise, his cheeks flushing. He fidgeted, putting his hands together, but he didn’t try to push me away.

Next, the black mist came out from his legs, coiling around my body once again. It felt like something entered my mind.

I should push him down...

“Master Jack!”

“Dear?!”

I felt hands on my shoulders. When I turned back, I found Adele and Julianne looking at me angrily.

Suddenly, I was brought back to reality and pulled my hand from his cheek.

What the hell was that?! If this had been a woman, then I would just think it was my inner Jack acting, but Gwynt was a man! Was Jack really *that* indiscriminate? *No, wait, calm down. It’s different. Here, it was like a specific emotion was forcefully amplified. Yeah, as if something coerced me to assault Gwynt...like a curse. Wait, don’t tell me there is a curse trying to replicate the events from the game where Gwynt gets assaulted by men?*

A chill ran down my spine as I realized how frightening the compelling force of the game’s setting was. And it didn’t help that I also remembered that Jack and Gwynt could end up together. How did I even forget? I wanted to punch myself for skipping romantic events just because I didn’t care about them.

“Sorry for worrying you. I’m fine now.” I gently pried myself from their hands and took some distance from Gwynt. I didn’t feel anything abnormal anymore—that black mist must have really been the cause. “Go ahead, Gwynt.”

“Yes!” he replied with his usual sweet smile, as if nothing had happened.

He entered the ruins, so I should be fine now. I turned toward Adele and Julianne, who were looking at me with worried expressions.

“Let’s follow him.”

Usually, they would answer immediately, but now they silently stared at me. I figured they couldn’t completely believe I was fine. Well, I didn’t want them to think I had been tempted by the charms of a guy, as Julianne might break our engagement, and Adele might fall out of love and leave me. Maybe I should explain.

“Do you want an explanation?”

“If you do not mind giving us one...” Julianne replied for both of them. Adele stayed silent, probably thinking that a mere guard didn’t have the right to ask.

“A black mist came out of Gwynt’s body and coiled itself around me. After

that, I couldn't control myself anymore. Did you not see it?"

They both shook their heads. Well, yeah, I figured that much. If they had, they wouldn't have just put their hands on my shoulders.

"My guess is that it's either a trap from the ruins or a spell from a monster, but I don't know the specifics."

"Then should we not retreat and investigate it?"

Julianne's point was perfectly fair. If I had truly not known the origin of what had happened, I would have accepted her suggestion. However, I was certain that it was because of Gwynt's curse to force the game's setting. It should be fine as long as I didn't approach him unprepared. And it wasn't like it happened every time, so it wasn't *that* dangerous. Right now, the priority was exploring the ruins.

"There's a high chance that someone is hiding in these ruins. We can't let them get away, and if we leave now, they probably will. Let's go."

Adele and Julianne looked like they wanted to say something, but I didn't intend to elaborate. I had just wanted to clear up the misunderstanding.

I started walking and Julianne chased after me. Adele waited for us to get some distance before taking up the rear.

There had been a little trouble, but now we finally could start the exploration of the ruins in earnest.

The pathway was a gentle downward slope. The half-destroyed building hadn't looked that big, but it seemed it was hiding an underground labyrinth or something, and I couldn't see the end of the path. The sunlight had stopped reaching us through the destroyed ceiling since we had entered the underground passage, and we were now using lanterns hanging at our waists. The floor was clean and polished to the point it was like a mirror. The ruins, contrary to their name, were well-maintained, and there was no dust or debris like there had been on the surface.

We proceeded deeper, without a trap or monster in sight.

After a while, we reached a giant three-meter double door. It was plain and made of wood. I examined it with my lantern. While its color was still mostly bright, it was fading here and there, showing how old it was.

“Please step away. I will investigate it,” Gwynt said, probably in case the door was rigged with an explosive trap.

He stood in front of the door, checking the floor and walls around it. Once certain it wasn’t trapped, he got on one knee and studied the door’s keyhole.

The rest of us watched silently, not wanting to bother him.

When he finished his investigation, Gwynt took out a stick and put it into the keyhole. It must have had a complex structure, because even after a dozen minutes he was still at it.

As I began to get more and more concerned that someone might suddenly appear out of nowhere, Gwynt stood up.

“I found no traps and unlocked the door, so we can enter now.”

Adele and Julianne were only good for battle, so Gwynt was really helpful for this kind of precise work. If he wasn’t here, we would have had to destroy the door.

“Good job. I’ll open it.”

While there weren’t any traps, there might be monsters inside. Staying on guard, I pushed the door slightly open and peeked through the gap. It was pitch dark and I couldn’t see anything. I didn’t hear anything either, so there probably weren’t any monsters. I pushed the door open a little more, and when there was enough space for someone to enter, Gwynt quickly slipped inside with his lantern.

We could now see the entrance of the room. There were no monsters, no people—nothing. Only orderly lined-up pillars.

“It seems safe. You can enter.”

Even with his vote of confidence, I stayed on guard and readied my blades before slowly entering the room. The other two followed, and with now four lanterns, the room was illuminated enough for us to see it in more detail.

“This is incredible...” Even Adele, who had traveled through various countries as an adventurer, was overwhelmed by the sight in front of us: a polished floor, countless pillars inscribed with the complex design of a snake with a flower, and a fresco on the high ceiling depicting an epic battle between people and monsters.

However, the light of our lanterns only illuminated a part of the room, and we could still go deeper. I couldn’t even imagine just how much time must have been spent to construct a place like this.

“I will check the back.”

“Wait.” I stopped Gwynt. “I can’t let you go alone. We’re all going together.”

We could only illuminate a part of the room with our lanterns. Considering how he could be attacked from any direction, it was too dangerous to let him go off on his own.

“...Understood. But *I* am the vanguard. I will not give my job to anyone else.”

Oh? I see that he has his pride as a scout. I don’t dislike that.

“Fine. I’m counting on you.”

“Yes!” He smiled sweetly then walked out, watching the floor.

Julianne walked next to me, and Adele followed us a few steps behind. Our footsteps were the only sound as we proceeded through the unchanging, eerie room. There were only pillars and nothing else—not even a single trap—so we had no reason to stop and kept advancing.

After a while, we reached what looked like an altar. At the top of a ten-step stair was an oblong box made of stone with no visible gap. Something was written on it, but I couldn’t read it. I could only understand that they were ancient characters thanks to Jack’s knowledge.

“This must be the tomb of an aristocrat,” Julianne muttered.

“Do you know anything about it?”

She smiled, glad that I was relying on her. “I once visited the tomb of the first Baron Dulac. It looked similar.”

Oh yeah, her father was a knight serving House Dulac. Considering they had enough money to have knights—unlike House Girard—it wouldn't surprise me if they also had extravagant tombs too. Though Baron Dulac's territory was next to mine, we never had any interaction, so I didn't know what kind of noble he was.

"So that means this stone box is a coffin, huh?" In a situation like this, the clichéd thing to happen would be for some undead thing to pop out. And considering they existed in the game, we should keep our guards up. "Let's check what's inside. Gwynt, you open it. Adele, you—" I shut my mouth the instant I heard footsteps coming from behind us.

The first one to move was Julianne. She turned back and pointed her spear in the direction of the footsteps. Adele stood in front of me and readied her twin swords to protect me. As for Gwynt, he hid behind the coffin and observed the situation.

I looked toward the direction the sound came from, but couldn't see anything in the darkness. If the enemy could move without light, that meant it might be a monster.

After a few seconds of waiting, as if forming itself from the darkness, a black humanoid silhouette appeared in the range of the light. It didn't have eyes, a nose, or a mouth and was completely black. I never saw anything like that in *Survival Strategies of a Corrupt Aristocrat.*

I felt like our eyes met—even though the creature didn't have any—and a chill ran down my spine. I could feel that it had a huge reserve of mana and that it would be difficult to deal with.

The humanoid shadow stepped forward.

It's coming!

However, contrary to what I had expected, someone spoke from behind it.

"Wait."

Next, a hooded man appeared from the darkness. He looked like the guy who had made the transaction with the lizardmen. If that was the case, he was the culprit who had laid waste to my territory, and I had to execute him.

“Who are you, and what are you doing in my domain?”

“That voice... Baron Girard?!”

The moment he understood who I was, I started to feel bloodlust emanate from the hooded man. Was he one of the people hostile to House Girard? Well, it wasn’t like anyone who picked a fight with a noble could be a decent guy, so it wasn’t going to end without a fight anyway.

I readied my dual blades and threw my left one with a spin at the man’s head. The attack was fast and sudden, so he didn’t manage to avoid it completely and his hood fell, revealing his face—one I knew.

“So, scoundrel, you’re from the Welza Company, huh?”

His name was Erwalt, a clerk who had often visited my mansion to do business with my parents. I remembered him because I had bought the ring I’d offered to Adele from him.

The Welza Company would be able to buy a lesser earth dragon through one of their connections. So that meant that they had made a transaction with the lizardmen as merchants to destroy Third Village.

But why would they do that? I couldn’t find a motive.

The Welza Company was contracted to House Girard, and we gave them a steady amount of work—there shouldn’t be any merit in betraying me. In that case, maybe that crime wasn’t of their own initiative. Like, for example, maybe they had a secret agreement with someone to secure better trading conditions if they killed me.

If so, it was highly possible they were double-crossing me. If my hypothesis that Erwalt and the Welza Company were being used was correct, then the mastermind should be an aristocrat. However, their peerage probably wasn’t any higher than count, as there wouldn’t be any merit for them to do business with the Welza Company. So that meant they were below viscount. A knight wouldn’t be a good enough patron, so they would need to at least be a baron. Coupled with the fact that the first person to attack the Girard territory in the game matched up to this description, then there was only one answer.

“Is Baron Dulac the one behind you?”

Erwalt's face twitched, surprised that I guessed without him giving me a hint.

Baron Dulac only attacked around the midgame, so I hadn't considered him a threat as we were still at the beginning. I had been careless. Just like how neighboring countries didn't get along, trouble often happened between neighboring domains, so I should have been on guard against him.

I speculated that he had most likely planned to destroy Third Village with the lizardmen, then told the royal family that House Girard was unfit to rule. That would lead to the royal family taking away my money, peerage, and lands, with the latter being granted to Baron Dulac.

"Well, not that I need to hear your answer. You're going to die here anyway."

Torturing some underlings wouldn't be enough to catch Baron Dulac. Using Julianne and her father to investigate should work better. And if they betrayed me, then I would just execute them.

"Damn it! Kill them!" Erwalt shouted toward the darkness and tried to flee, but something flew through the air and stabbed his leg. "Argh!" He collapsed. He tried to stand back up, but couldn't move his leg correctly because of the pain and failed.

I turned back and found Gwynt smiling coldly, a black knife in his hand. I figured he had thrown one of the knives coated with paralyzing poison we had found at the entrance.

"I won't forgive anyone threatening Lord Jack," he declared.

"Great job, Gwynt! Take care of him!"

In the meantime, the humanoid shadow grew to about two meters in height. It pointed a hand toward Julianne, which stretched forward after taking the form of a spear. It was a speed you could react to even without releasing your mana, so Julianne easily dodged, then drew closer to the shadow and thrust her spear at it. It did no damage, though, as it harmlessly passed through the shadow. Apparently it was like mist and didn't have a physical body.

The black shadow's surface started undulating.

"Get back!" I yelled.

Julianne didn’t question my order and distanced herself without hesitation.

The next instant, black thorns flew out of the humanoid shadow and stabbed into the ground. It seemed that it became solid when it attacked. If I hadn’t warned Julianne, she would have ended up full of holes.

As if exchanging places with Julianne, Adele rushed at the shadow. Meanwhile, I released my mana all over my body. It didn’t seem like an opponent I could best easily, so I prepared myself to go all out.

Adele slashed at the shadow with her twin swords, but it didn’t even bother avoiding them as the blades passed through its trunk, arms, and even head before reforming itself. It wasn’t regenerating. It was more like striking the surface of water, not doing any damage as it just returned to its original form. Even if Adele kept at it for hours—or even days—she wouldn’t be able to defeat it like this.

What was that shadow, and what had created it?

I glanced at Erwalt, who had been captured by Gwynt, but he didn’t appear to be using magic to control the shadow. And with his body paralyzed, he couldn’t be using a special item to manipulate it either.

While I had been watching our surroundings, Julianne had joined Adele. I supposed that the matter of Baron Dulac must have been on her mind, but fighting the enemy had taken precedence. She thrust her spear at the shadow, but once again, it didn’t do anything. I didn’t even feel its mana decreasing, so it worked on a different principle than normal monsters. I could see its mana moving, but I didn’t sense the core that served as its source.

“How futile! Your attacks will never harm it!” Erwalt boasted and laughed unpleasantly.

The fact that someone unused to battle like him could show so much composure proved that my theory of continuing the fight like this would be useless was correct. I felt bad for Adele and Julianne, but they would have to buy some time for me.

I discreetly moved next to Gwynt to not attract the enemy’s attention.

“Can you move in the darkness?”

“Yes. I have good night vision.”

“Then can you turn off your lantern and look around to see if anyone else is here?”

“...I see, so that is how it works. Understood,” he replied, realizing that someone else might be controlling the humanoid shadow.

Gwynt turned his lantern off and blended into the darkness. Rather than a scout, I really should consider making him an assassin. Or a spy.

With nothing to do for the moment, I decided to talk with Erwalt.

“When did you start betraying me?” I didn’t bother asking why. No answer he could give would sit well with me.

“...Since your father, you pitiful excuse of a baron.”

Was he calling me pitiful for using the Welza Company without noticing their betrayal? Or because I had to deal with my father’s failures? No matter which it was, he was looking down on me, and I didn’t like that, so I stomped on him.

Hearing him groan in pain like a frog calmed me down. “You’re a traitor, and I’ll punish you for that.”

I’d do it without fail. And, of course, the Welza Company wasn’t my only target. I would never forgive Baron Dulac for trying to steal what’s mine either. Anyone who was an obstacle to my life of luxury needed to be erased.

“You are misunderstanding something. *You* are the one who betrayed us first, Baron Girard.” He glared at me hatefully.

There wasn’t any official record left of most of the transactions my parents...no, the *pigs* had made with the Welza Company. So while I didn’t know the details, it wouldn’t surprise me if they’d done something stupid and betrayed the company somehow.

Basically, he was saying that as their son, it was just as much my responsibility. What a load of bull. “So what? That has nothing to do with me.”

A child should take responsibility for their parents? That’s stupid. Parents and children were different people with different values. Why would I need to take responsibility for them? I was just going to do what I wanted to do.

“Who cares who cast the first stone here? You betrayed me, and I’ll never forgive you for that. That’s all there is to it.”

“And you are sure you can proceed apace without the support of the Welza Company?”

Because of the many years of misgovernment, there wasn’t a single decent company left in the demesne. So what he was insinuating was that without the Welza Company, I wouldn’t be able to import stuff from other domains and would even have difficulties obtaining daily necessities, leading to the overall decline of the territory.

“Are you stupid? There are tons of options to replace you.” In fact, a few useful ones even appeared in the game, so I could easily replace the Welza Company by contacting them.

The conversation was starting to get bothersome, so I was going to stab Erwalt when—

“I found enemies!” I heard Gwynt’s voice and the sounds of battle, which stopped me in my tracks.

However, the humanoid shadow was still fighting Adele and Julianne, so Gwynt wasn’t battling its controller.

Then there was only one thing to do.

“Seems like you came with some company,” I said and kicked Erwalt in the jaw with all my strength. “Someone is manipulating the shadow. Go beat him!” I shouted.

Adele immediately reacted, darting away from the humanoid shadow and rushing toward Gwynt. Her dog ears weren’t for show. Just how good must they be to be able to identify where Gwynt was just from the sounds of battle?

She soon reached her destination and began to fight against two warriors in leather armor. Her lantern also illuminated Gwynt, who was in his own intense battle against another warrior. And a little ways away was a fat man holding a black crystal—Spencer, the son of the Welza Company’s representative. It seemed he was the one controlling the shadow, so we needed to kill him quickly.

Speaking of the humanoid shadow, it spread its arms and extended them in two arcs, trying to entrap Julianne while firing black arrows from its body at the same time. She could avoid its arms by stepping back, but not the arrows. Going forward wasn't even an option, so all that was left was to jump to dodge all the attacks. But, of course, that had been the enemy's plan. It fired black arrows at Julianne once more, who couldn't avoid them in midair. Thankfully there were only three, so she managed to deflect them with the shaft of her spear. However, that made her lose her balance and she fell to the ground on all fours. She couldn't dodge the shadow's next attack in that position, so I rushed in and carried her away as its attack crashed into the ground where she'd been just a moment ago, the sound of its strike resonating through the air.

"I'll take care of this. Can you go help Adele?" I asked Julianne, who was blushing and looking at me in a daze. I wanted to wait for her reply, but the humanoid shadow was already locking onto me. "I'm counting on you!"

I did a small detour to pick up the sword I had thrown at Erwalt earlier and rushed at the shadow. It fired five black arrows at me, but I knocked them down with my blades. As long as it didn't launch a whole volley at me, I could easily defend myself with my twin swords.

Once I drew near to the creature, I jumped and swung my blade horizontally at its neck, decapitating it. But its head immediately reattached itself to its body without looking any worse for wear.

Next, the humanoid shadow grew thorns from its body. I clicked my tongue as I was still in midair. I swung down my swords at the black thorns and used the impact to propel myself upward, but it then assaulted me with thorns created from its head. For an instant, I thought about dodging with *Shadow Walk*, but the spell worked by sinking into my shadow to reappear from another in my field of vision, so I couldn't use it midair. I could only count on the dual-wielding skills Adele had taught me.

I swung my right sword horizontally to deflect the black thorn aiming for my face, and my left blade for the one targeting my stomach. My parries enabled me to avoid fatal injuries, but some thorns had stabbed into my limbs. They disappeared just after, though, probably because the shadow had stopped materializing them.

Once I landed, I immediately put my guard up, but the humanoid shadow didn't try to make another attack.

"What's happening?" I muttered, watching my surroundings.

Erwalt was still on the ground. Julianne had listened to my request and was helping Adele and Gwynt; one of the warriors in leather armor had been defeated. Of the remaining two, Adele was facing one, and Gwynt and Julianne the other. As for Spencer, he was watching them anxiously from the rear.

Then the black crystal in Spencer's hands shone, and the humanoid shadow went his way. He had stopped trying to defeat me and switched to defending himself. And because my comrades believed that I would keep the humanoid shadow at bay, they didn't notice it approaching.

If I let it go they'll be in danger!

"Shadow Walk."

I sank into my shadow and came out of Spencer's.

"How did you do that?!" he shouted in surprise, not even trying to attack me. He wasn't used to battle.

I let go of the sword in my right hand and began to strangle him. He didn't even try to resist, so I also put the tip of my left blade against his cheek.

"Stop that thing."

"Who is going to— Ow!" I stabbed him a little, with just the tip of the blade, before he could complain. It was enough to make him cry. Just how weak to pain was he?

"This is your last chance. Stop that thing."

"Fine..."

The black crystal stopped shining, and the humanoid shadow disappeared. Apparently, it was a monster...no, a sort of golem created by mana. I figured it could move until Spencer was out of mana.

"Young Master!" called the warrior fighting against Adele. He started heading my way to save Spencer, but Adele cut him from behind and he collapsed. He

should have known that turning your back on your enemy was basically suicide, but he still had wanted to try saving Spencer.

The remaining warrior was also killed, his heart pierced by Julianne's spear, and his head liberated from his body by Gwynt's sword.

"So, why is the heir of the Welza Company here?" I asked. It wasn't like he was needed to control the humanoid shadow, so why was he on the front line?

"...He told my father to make me participate if we wanted to earn his trust."

"By 'he' you mean Baron Dulac, I presume?"

For traitors to earn trust somewhere else, they had to show how serious they were about it. Underlings wouldn't be enough—so they chose the heir himself. Moreover, it was a job that also prevented them from becoming double agents and returning to their previous position of being only my contracted merchants.

"Yeah! Him! That shitty baron! I won't let him get away with this!"

That's what I *should be saying, you damn traitor.*

It seemed Spencer thought I wouldn't kill him—how laughable. It was just a matter of when. Once someone betrayed me, their only fate was death.

"What a coincidence. There are a few people whom I feel the same way about."

I obviously was referring to the Welza Company and Baron Dulac. Restoring the territory took precedence and I couldn't fight them head-on, but even if it took me a long time, I would definitely crush them. If I didn't, I wouldn't be able to live in peace.

"I know, ri—!" He was being overfamiliar, so I tightened my grip on his neck.

He let go of his black crystal and tried to resist, but my arm didn't budge. He was basically nothing compared to the strength I had gained from defeating the lesser earth dragon and the ogre.

"Don't worry, I'm not going to kill you now. After all, we have to make you talk once we're back to the village." I threw Spencer to the ground. He started coughing violently; perhaps he'd hurt his back. "Gwynt, bind the ones who are still alive. Adele and Julianne, go look around to see if there's someone else in

the room.”

While they carried out their orders, I stopped the bleeding from my wounds and went to investigate the tomb of the aristocrat. I climbed the short stairs and stood in front of the coffin. I tried to read the words carved on the stone once again, but I still couldn’t understand them. But if I were to believe what Julianne had said, it was a tomb and a corpse should be inside. Moreover, there was a high chance that it was someone related to House Girard.

“Do you want me to open it?” Gwynt asked, having finished tying up the survivors.

“Yeah.”

There could be a trap inside, so I let Gwynt do it. He put his ear to the coffin and the floor in sequence, knocking on them to check. Nothing happened, so he tried to open the lid a little, but no matter how hard he tried—even putting all his weight into it—it didn’t budge.

“Is it locked?”

“No, I do not think so. It feels as if it is fixed in space, or something like that...” Gwynt tried to explain, puzzled.

So I decided to try too and touched the lid. The instant I felt the cold, hard stone, the letters carved on the coffin started to emit pale light.

“Huh?!” Gwynt shouted in surprise.

I didn’t show it, but I was just as shocked. Light also came out of the ceiling and illuminated the room.

“Are you all right, Master Jack?!”

“Dear!”

Adele and Julianne noticed the strange occurrence and hurried my way.

“I’m fine,” I said, but they didn’t stop—in fact, they didn’t even slow down before tackling me in a hug. “Hey! That’s dangerous!”

I was going to be pushed down, so I reinforced my body with mana and somehow managed to endure. The trouble didn’t stop as they were now

fighting over me, trying to shove each other's faces away from me before devolving into a full scuffle. Gwynt looked at them exasperatedly as they bared their teeth at each other.

They had finally started to cooperate, but at this rate, the team's cohesion would break entirely.

"Stop your meaningless squabble." They both stopped moving and looked at me fearfully. If I didn't make it clear now, they would keep doing it forever. "I hate internal discord. If you can't work together, then leave the Girard territory." I was being harsh, but my hand was forced here. I wanted them to understand that with all the enemies the territory had, I didn't want to have to deal with my comrades fighting among themselves as well.

"I am sorry."

"We shall never do that again."

Adele apologized first, then Julianne. I had been resolved to drive them out if they objected, but my fears had been groundless.

"Don't quarrel in front of me again." It should be fine from now on. If their relationship still deteriorated after that, then I would have to think of something else. "Well then, let's see if I can open this thing."

I shifted my focus back to the coffin, the carved letters on it still shining. I pushed the heavy lid and managed to open it a little. I peered inside, but it was too dark to see anything. Since there didn't appear to be any traps, I kept pushing it open until a white skeleton came into view.

Gwynt gasped in fear and clung to me. He might be doing it unconsciously, but he touched other men like that quite often. It was no wonder that unfortunate erotic events kept happening to him.

I calmed myself down through sheer force of will before my lust could act up again and gently pulled him off of me.

"Now we're certain it's a tomb."

The skeleton must have been here for a long time, as it was quite decayed. In its arms was a sword approximately one meter long.

"A longsword... And it has a poisonous snake and a flower on its scabbard, huh?"

That was the motif used for House Girard's crest. Each family head had their own design, so I could deduce who it was from the crest on the scabbard. "That must be the founder's weapon."

A yellow snake flaring its neck and hood was the design used by the first head of House Girard. It corresponded to the one drawn in the record of all the family crests we kept in the mansion, so there was no doubt about it.

"Then does this tomb belong to House Girard?" Julianne asked.

I wanted to say that wasn't the case, as my family's tombs were elsewhere, but I couldn't ignore the presence of the longsword. There wasn't any mention of Jack's ancestors in the game, and the founder could have been buried somewhere different from the rest of the family for all I knew.

"Could be," I answered, as I touched the sword in the arms of the skeleton.

I didn't feel anything weird—no mysterious presence or curse. I figured it was safe, so I took it, breaking the arm bones in the process.

From what I had heard, the founder of House Girard had been a brave and stern man. Considering he hadn't wanted to be separated from his weapon

even in death, I felt kinda bad about this. I paid my respect in my mind as I drew the blade from its sheath.

"...It's beautiful."

Even after all the time it must have been in there, the sword didn't have a single speck of rust. The blade was black with a tinge of red, and fine grooves in a flower pattern were carved on it. They were probably made to have blood flow through them when cutting enemies. I felt some kind of cruel artistry from it—the more flesh it cut, the more red flowers bloomed on the blade.

"I wonder what it is made from? It does not seem to be metal," Adele commented, more interested in its utility than its beauty.

"I don't know, but it must be made from a strong monster." It was possible to create special weapons from fangs, claws, scales, and other monster parts, and the method already existed back when the founder was alive, so I was rather sure of myself.

"I have never seen a sword that looked so beautiful and practical before. I would expect nothing less of a weapon used by my husband's ancestor," Julianne said, looking at it in fascination.

For the daughter of a knight—who had probably seen tons of weapons in her life—to say that, it must really be quite a unique sword. Whether I used it or sold it, it would benefit me.

What a good find. Not only did I discover traitors, I even obtained a treasure like this. I couldn't stop smiling. *Praise be to my ancestor!*

"Well then, let's test it." I wanted to know if it had some special power like the Twin Hydra Blades.

When I poured mana into the sword, the grooves carved into the blade started pulsating. It was so eerie that I almost dropped it. My game knowledge didn't provide me with any information about the founder's weapon or any kind of pulsating, throbbing blades. Or rather, there was nothing about the ruins we were currently in at all. The fact that there were so many details totally omitted from the game was starting to be a real pain. I understood that it was impossible for this world to be exactly the same as the game's, but the weapon

of House Girard's founder should at least have been in the documentation.

"...It seems rather dangerous. Just looking at it scares me." Gwynt—the most "normal" among us—was frightened, and that probably was the reaction ordinary people should have. Using it in front of my citizens might not yield good results for my popularity, so I should be careful about where I use it.

"Now, let's try cutting something with it."

Thankfully, there were two incapacitated people and three corpses available. I went over to the guy Adele had killed and stabbed through his trunk from behind. The blade easily went through his leather armor like it was tofu, and even pierced the ground. The grooves throbbed, sucking his blood, and red flowers bloomed on the blade.

I had been wrong. The grooves weren't to make the blood flow but to suck it out. You could probably kill someone from blood loss just by putting the sword against an open wound. Moreover, the blood spread through the whole sword up to the hilt, then went through my arm and healed my injuries. I felt like something was going inside me, but it immediately disappeared, so I might have just imagined it. Not only did it heal me, but it also restored the sword, as the small scratches on it disappeared.

Unlike most games, there wasn't any healing magic in *Survival Strategies of a Corrupt Aristocrat*, only potions. So being able to recover by sucking blood was a pretty attractive ability.

It might have been your favorite sword, founder, but now it's mine, and I'll never part with it, I thought as the blade continued to suck blood, healing my wounds and restoring itself.

"The Vampire Sword..." I muttered the words that had suddenly flashed through my mind. The name felt just right, and I couldn't help but feel that the Vampire Sword was precious to me. I didn't want to let anyone else use it. I felt more possessive about it than I had earlier.

"A fitting name for a beautiful yet terrifying weapon," Julianne commented, her eyes glued on the sword.

On the other hand, Adele was the same as usual, and Gwynt was hiding

behind the coffin, frightened. They all had different reactions.

“Anyway, I think we’re done with our investigation now.” I sheathed the Vampire Sword and put the lid back on the coffin. *Dear ancestor. I’m gonna use your weapon, so rest in peace.* “Adele, you take Erwalt, and Julianne, you can take Spencer. Let’s go back.”

Gwynt and I went ahead back to the surface and made sure nothing was lurking around, then Adele and Julianne joined us and we arrived at the ruins’ entrance.

Suddenly, Gwynt stopped and whispered to me, “I sense people.”

Not monsters, but people. The ruins were in a clearing in the middle of the forest, so we were surrounded by trees, and there were tons of places to hide. I didn’t know where our mysterious interlopers were, but I signaled to Adele and Julianne with my eyes to let them know that there were enemies afoot. They threw the two men they were holding to the ground and readied their weapons —Adele her crimson twin swords, and Julianne her spear.

After waiting for a while, I heard the sound of boots trudging across grass from in front of us, and five people appeared from behind the trees. Four of them wore the same leather armor as the warriors we had fought inside the ruins. They didn’t look like adventurers, but rather soldiers hired by the Welza Company to attack me. The last one, leading them, wore metal armor with a great helm. In his hands were a short spear and a shield painted with the crest of something looking like a grape. From his equipment, I figured he was a knight.

“Father...” Julianne muttered.

What?! I didn’t think that Julianne would mistake her own father, but it was hard to believe.

“I see you look well, Julianne,” the knight said, ignoring my astonished look. He didn’t have any intention to hide his identity, and so I immediately recognized Yon’s voice.

I didn’t know what was happening, but in the worst case, Julianne could be a traitor too, so Adele, Gwynt, and I stepped away from her.

“Were you not returning home?” Julianne asked.

“...I received an order on the way back.” Yon put his shield in front of him and readied his short spear as he answered.

That order was certainly to attack me, which confirmed that Baron Dulac was the one working behind the scenes.

“I’ll tell Count Belmond about this,” I interjected in their conversation to probe him. The way I’d deal with this situation would depend on how he reacted to the mention of my—and Baron Dulac’s—liege-lord.

“You are too naive if you think he would come to protect you.”

From his reply, I guessed that Count Belmond was in with Baron Dulac. It seemed everyone around me wished for my death.

...Well, bring it on! I’m *the one who’s going to kill all of* you!

“Please, Father, think about what you are doing!”

He had revealed his identity and was preparing to attack, so even Julianne should know that he wouldn’t stop. Still, she tried to persuade him, not wanting to believe her father would do something like that. She was naive, and I loathed how it felt like looking at myself back in Japan. Even if they were family, people easily betrayed each other. Unconditionally believing someone was foolish and resulted only in weakness. That was why I wanted to become strong enough to be able to live on my own, even if everyone betrayed me.

“You don’t have to help me, Julianne. But don’t get in my way.” He ignored his daughter and prepared to move, but I wouldn’t let him.

Asking why my territory is being targeted can wait. For now, I have to defeat the enemies in front of me.

“Shadow Walk.”

I sank into my shadow and came out of Yon’s. I took him by surprise and thrust one of my twin swords at him, but he used his astonishing reaction speed to guard with his shield. A metallic sound resonated as my blade was repelled.

One of the warriors he brought with him took the opportunity to strike while I was unbalanced, but thankfully, Adele and Gwynt defended me.

As for Julianne... She was unmoving and looked at her father and me in turn, wondering which one she should help. I was a little relieved to learn that she hadn't been a traitor with the intention to stab me in the back from the start.

"I'm leaving the small fry to you!" I yelled to provoke the warriors. I hoped that would make them lose their tempers even a little.

Yon thrust his short spear at me, but I parried it with my left sword, then took a step forward and swung down my right blade at him. He blocked with his shield, but that was fine. Now that I was close, he couldn't use his short spear or shield and was full of openings. I thrust my left sword at his flank, but before it could reach, I felt his mana swell.

He's gonna use magic!

"Shock Wave."

I was hit by something invisible and blown away. It had been weak and didn't injure me, but I was now a few meters away from him. I had been on guard, but I hadn't expected him to be able to use magic.

He wasn't in my range anymore, but I was certainly in his. I wanted to draw closer, but Yon thrust continuously with his weapon and didn't allow me to step forward. His strikes were fast and heavy, so even if I was managing to ward them off, I was slowly being driven into a corner. Moreover, his short spear was of far better quality than my simple metal blades, which started to crack. They weren't going to last long.

"Father! Please stop!" Julianne cried, tears in her eyes, but her father didn't listen.

Looking at him, I saw a knight killing his own feelings and fighting for his liege. Some people would praise him and say he was a wonderful knight, but from my point of view, he was only a pitiful, exploited man—like the corporate slaves in my past life.

"Is what you are doing worth betraying me and hurting your daughter?" I asked, hoping it would buy me some time.

"Everything is for my lord!"

“What did he do for you? He knighted you and gave you some money. That’s it.” Serving someone as a knight sounded cool, but it was deceiving. It was only a business relationship of exchanging money for protection. “As we speak, while you’re grievously hurting your daughter, your liege is probably in bed with a woman. And yet you still think it’s worth obeying this order?”

What exactly happens when you insult something near and dear to someone’s heart? Well, probably something like how Yon reacted to that provocation.

“You don’t understand at all!” he shouted angrily as he continuously thrust his short spear.

I knew he would react like that, so I had been prepared.

“Shadow Bind.”

My shadow stretched and coiled itself around Yon’s legs. His spearhead stopped right before my eyes.

“No, I don’t understand. Nor do I particularly want to.”

I drew closer and struck at his flank with my twin swords. However, they broke the moment they met his armor, not even leaving a scratch.

These damn cheap weapons couldn’t withstand this intense battle! If this goes on, he’s gonna be able to hit me with no fear of a counter! I grew flustered and threw away my now useless swords as I leaped back to take some distance.

“As if someone like you could break the armor offered by my liege!” Yon forcibly tore off my shadow and charged at me.

I wanted to dodge to the side, but I was sandwiched by trees. *Wait, don’t tell me he was aiming for this?!* He had pretended to be angry to corner me, and now his spearhead was nearing my chest.

I reflexively twisted my upper body and somehow avoided it as it shaved my breastplate. However, I couldn’t dodge the shield bash that followed just after it and was blown away. I didn’t have the composure to correct my posture and had to sacrifice my arm to avoid falling on my head before rolling on the ground and hitting a tree.

“Gah hah!” I coughed blood. My left arm and a few ribs had been broken.

Yon was approaching, so I had to quickly get to my feet, but the pain was dulling my movement. By the time I’d stood with the assistance of a nearby tree, Yon was already in front of me.

“If you do not resist, you will not suffer. Please accept your death.”

Contrary to Seravimia, who had been trying to make me her comrade, Yon was truly trying to kill me.

So Baron Dulac is seriously wishing for my death, huh? Jeez, my territory has so many enemies. If I survive this, I’m totally gonna throw all the insults I can think of at my sleeping parents once I’m back to the mansion.

“As if. I’m gonna fight to the end.” I endured the pain and grinned as I put my hand on the Vampire Sword’s hilt.

Seeing I was going to resist, Yon pulled his short spear back, preparing for a thrust. “Very well. Then show me how far you can go.”

In the game, knights were strong characters, so at my current level I probably wouldn’t be able to dodge the next strike completely. The only way to win was to avoid a fatal injury and use the Vampire Sword to suck his blood and heal.

I focused on the spearhead to not miss his aim—which appeared to be my face. A hit would be lethal, but it should be easy to avoid. I just had to incline my head and slash at his legs as I fell.

However, before I could carry out my plan, Yon’s movement suddenly changed and he turned to the side. I did the same and saw that Julianne was preparing to throw her spear at him. Yon immediately put his shield in front of him and guarded against the incoming spear, but he didn’t resist the impact and was blown away.

“...No way,” I let out, dumbfounded.

Julianne attacked her father? That’s impossible! There’s no way that she could go against her father! She was hesitating! She decided not to fight!

“Dear...” I had thought of Julianne as being bright as the sun, but right now, she wore a forlorn expression. She was crying and didn’t appear to be in any

condition to fight. And yet, she had thrown her spear to save me. With this, all my doubts about her possible betrayal vanished. “I... I am disqualified to be your fiancée. Even though I decided to become a part of House Girard, I hesitated to fight against my father.”

When marrying into another family, you had to be prepared for even your parents to become your enemies. Julianne had finally found her resolve.

“Who is your family now?” I asked.

“House Girard, Dear.” She wiped her tears and answered without wavering. People who had resolved themselves were strong, and I was certain she would be a great help for this fight. “Please see my resolve as a member of House Girard!”

She picked up her spear and glared at Yon—who stood up calmly as if he hadn’t been blown away at all—and charged at him. Though the weapons were different in length, they were both fighting with spears. However, Yon had the advantage, and Julianne found herself mainly on the defensive.

I took the opportunity to check on my comrades. Only one of Yon’s warriors remained. I had been worried because it had been four-to-two, but they had proven no match for Adele. Strangely, Gwynt’s upper armor was partially destroyed, and his clothes were torn, but he didn’t appear to be injured.

Seriously? An unfortunate erotic event happened in a situation like this? That mechanic could at least read the room and not break the gravitas.

I drew the Vampire Sword and staggered forward, letting the blade trail along the ground. I stopped in front of a headless corpse, most likely killed by Adele.

“Give me your blood.”

I effortlessly pierced his leather armor and drove my weapon into his heart, where a lot of blood gathered. The etched grooves on the blade throbbed as the sword drank its fill. The blood flowed through the hilt, then coursed up my right arm as it mended my injuries and my fractured ribs. However, even after drying up the corpse, my left arm was still broken, and the pain in my internal organs remained.

“That’s not enough. I need more blood.”

With a steadier gait than before, I walked toward the next corpse. It only had a cut on its neck, so I guessed Gwynt had killed him by aiming at his vitals.

I have to suck its blood before it loses everything!

I impaled its heart and the Vampire Sword sucked its blood, red flowers blooming on its blade. I healed more, but it still wasn't enough. Even after draining the last corpse, I hadn't recovered completely. It must have been because the dead had already lost much of their blood. It was better to suck directly from the living.

I then heard the yell of the last warrior fighting against Adele and Gwynt. *Oh, he's still alive? Great.*

I released all the mana in my mana-storing organs and rushed at full speed behind the warrior. He noticed me and turned his head back, but he was too slow.

"Your blood is mine!"

To avoid wasting blood, I refrained from cutting him and instead stabbed him from behind, did a foot sweep, pushed him down, then stomped on his legs to prevent escape. Moisture vanished from his skin, and he dried up in only a dozen seconds.

Perhaps the Vampire Sword was pleased, as its red flowers were still visible even now. I pulled it out of the corpse and raised it toward the sky.

"...How beautiful," I said reflexively.

"Master...Jack?" Adele muttered, perplexed.

"What?"

I didn't know where it came from, but I sensed power coursing through my entire body and felt really good. I had answered gently, looking into Adele's eyes, but for some reason, she was looking vigilantly at me as if I was a stranger.

And here I'd tried to be kind. What's the point of my *guard being cautious of* me*? Shouldn't you be worried about everything else* besides *me?*

I had thought she did her job well, but it seemed I would need to warn her. And I should discipline her to be more conscious about protecting me while I

was at it.

As I extended my hand toward Adele, Gwynt called out, “Lord Jack... Your eyes...”

“What? If you want to say something...” When I saw his torso through his torn clothes, I was overcome with arousal and seized him by the shoulders. “...then speak clearly.”

“Huh? Lord...Jack?”

He tried to escape, but I didn’t let him. It seemed I had to teach him that he couldn’t go against me. I brought my face closer to his, but he put a knife between us to protect himself.

As if that would be enough to stop me... Wait, what the hell?! I saw my reflection on the blade—the whites of my eyes had turned red. *What the hell happened?!* I let go of Gwynt’s shoulders and stepped back. *What’s wrong with me...? Discipline Adele? Teach Gwynt? Why would I think that when they’re already doing a great job?*

—Let me suck more blood.

A voice echoed in my head.

—Give me your body.

I hadn’t noticed when I was half-conscious because of my injuries, but now I realized it came from the Vampire Sword in my right hand. The instant I understood the voice’s identity, my mind cleared and my desire for blood calmed down.

Damn it! I let my guard down because it’s a weapon from my family. I didn’t think the founder’s sword would be cursed. I guess that’s why it was buried with him. Thinking about it, that might have been why the founder had been hugging the Vampire Sword in his arms as if he never wanted to let it go.

That weapon is dangerous! It almost transformed me into a bloodsucking fiend!

I tried to throw the sword away, but my body didn’t obey me. That’s when I noticed that a red flower, much like the ones on the sword, had appeared on

the back of my right hand.

“...It’s corroding my body?” My blood ran cold.

Adele noticed something strange was happening to me and immediately tried to separate the Vampire Sword from my hand, but the blade didn’t budge. Gwynt tried to help too, but the result was the same: it was stuck to my hand.

You couldn’t remove cursed equipment. There were some cursed objects besides this in the game, and to remove the curse you had to use a special item that was difficult to obtain. What’s more, it didn’t even always work.

Well, I guess I’ll have to live with this cursed sword for a while.

“Let’s leave this aside for now. We have to help Julianne.”

While the Vampire Sword had been trying to control me, the fight against Yon hadn’t stopped. He still had the advantage, and Julianne was now covered with wounds. Her spear was on the ground, broken in two, and she was currently fighting with a sword. She was losing.

“I will go!” Adele didn’t want me to use the Vampire Sword and joined the fray with her crimson twin swords. However, Yon blocked her quick strike with his shield.

Wait, he can keep up with Adele’s speed?

While knights were strong characters, they were just generic units and weren’t as powerful as Adele. Yon didn’t appear in *Survival Strategies of a Corrupt Aristocrat*, but if I had to guess, he might be as strong as a named character. The game was party-based, so there was a chance Adele would lose if she fought alone against a named enemy of the same level. I had to help her.

“I’m going too. Gwynt, you watch over these two to make sure they don’t run away.”

I had almost forgotten about them, but we still had Spencer and Erwalt as hostages. The Welza Company would probably try to get them back, so we needed to watch out.

“But are you all right, Lord Jack?” he asked, anxious that the curse might take me over again.

The red flower on the back of my right hand was still there, but my mind was clear. As long as I didn't suck blood, I should be fine.

I should be able to resist... No, I will *resist!*

"I'm fine. Leave everything to me." I forced myself to grin to reassure him, then I ran off.

All my injuries had been healed, so I was in perfect form and could go all out. I went behind Yon, who was enduring attacks from both Julianne and Adele, and swung the Vampire Sword down. I thought I had taken him by surprise, but he dodged by leaping to the side and rolling on the ground. I didn't wait for him to stand up and stepped forward, thrusting my sword at him. He blocked it with his shield, but it was just as I had planned. After all, wounding him and sucking his blood would be a problem.

"Taaah!" Adele yelled, leaping at Yon with her blades.

Yon couldn't move, so he raised his other arm and defended himself with his short spear.

His flank is open!

Resolved, Julianne struck his side with her blade. His armor caved in, and he was sent flying. The impact was strong enough to remove his helmet and reveal his face, which was warped in pain. He must have broken a bone or two.

"Well done!" I praised Julianne before she could regret attacking her father, affirming that she had done the right thing.

Adele rotated her swords in a reverse-grip and rushed at Yon to finish him off. She was going all out, releasing all her mana, so she was really fast. However, even after receiving a blow heavy enough to crumple his sturdy armor, Yon quickly stood up and readied his shield. Adele probably thought that her crimson dual blades wouldn't be able to pierce Yon's shield, as she jumped above him and aimed at his neck from behind.

"Shock Wave."

Having sensed the flow of the mana, Adele crossed her arms in front of her face to protect it as an invisible impact assaulted her. She was sent flying into a

tree, breaking a few branches.

He was good at close combat *and* could use magic. As you would expect from someone as strong as a named character.

“Is that all you can do? If you cannot defeat a mere knight like me, how do you hope to win against Baron Dulac?” Yon said. He added bloodlust to his mana, and the air practically strained under the load. The atmosphere was so heavy that even Adele, who had stood back up, didn’t resume her attack.

“What are you saying? As long as I take care of you, this will all be over.”

While Baron Dulac wanted to kill me, he couldn’t do it directly. If it was too obvious he was trying to get my territory, he wouldn’t be able to avoid criticism from the royal family and the other nobles. As long as I could defeat Yon, I should be able to make a truce via Count Belmond—our liege-lord—or the royal family.

“You are too naive, Baron Girard.”

“What do you mean?” I asked. Adele, Julianne, and I had surrounded Yon. If we all attacked at the same time, we should be able to break through his defenses even if he used magic.

“House Girard is in a far worse position than you think.”

After her visit, Seravimia should have reported that there was no problem in the Girard territory. Was I mistaken to think that the situation had improved? I didn’t have many interactions with other domains, so I didn’t know what they thought of me.

“Explain.”

“Baron Dulac is not the only one targeting these lands. Count Belmond and the royal family are too.”

I gasped, too shocked to reply. Even my liege-lord and the royal family—the ones supposed to stop conflicts from happening—wanted my domain. In that case, killing Yon could actually become the cue for Baron Dulac waging war on me. Moreover, if he had Count Belmond and the royal family on his side, there was no way I could win. I was in checkmate.

“Why would they want my territory?”

Getting these rural lands wouldn’t earn them much money. In fact, as my lands were some distance from Count Belmond’s own, managing it would be a pain and he would actually lose money. I didn’t see why he would go as far as destroying House Girard to get them.

“I do not know. In fact, I think neither Baron Dulac nor Count Belmond do either.”

“They’re attacking my domain without a reason? That’s absurd!”

“It is as you say, Baron Girard. Their actions are detestable, no different from bandits. And yet, even though they understand that, they cannot stop.”

“Why...?”

“Because of the hero, Lady Seravimia. She has her attention on these lands... No, she is obsessed with them and desires them absolutely. Because of that, Baron Dulac is convinced that an immense fortune is hidden here.”

Seravimia again?! That damn Grim Reaper!

Did the royal family and Count Belmond notice that she was investigating me and my territory? She looked like the careful sort, but she was actually insanely careless “And that’s why they want my domain to the point of sacrificing tons of lives? How foolish!”

“I agree.” Yon lowered his stance and readied his short spear, preparing to end this conversation. “However, I am a knight serving Baron Dulac, and I must obey him.”

“Father!” Julianne shouted, unable to endure it anymore. It wasn’t that her resolve was shaking, but that she must have thought it was her last chance to persuade her father.

“Who do you call your family?” Yon’s tone was icy.

“...House Girard.”

“Exactly. While you still only are his fiancée, you are marrying into House Girard. Forget about House Froid,” he remonstrated her in a soft tone, then turned toward me. “Baron Girard.”

“What?”

“Julianne’s resolve is firm enough to even kill her father. She will never betray you.”

He truly understood me. If she had the resolve to kill her father, then I couldn’t break our engagement. After all, if I did so after defeating Yon, it would be an act of betrayal—something I hated more than anything. “What do you want to say?” I asked.

“I entrust my daughter to you.”

Yon’s mana suddenly swelled.

He’s gonna use magic!

“Shock Wave.”

Shock waves assaulted Adele and me, who had been targeting him from behind. I somehow resisted by putting my arms in front of me and bending forward, but Adele was blown away.

Julianne, however, was able to move freely, and she charged at Yon and thrust her sword into his abdomen.

“Gah!” He should have been able to easily avoid the blow, but the blade had stabbed him through a gap in his armor. He coughed up blood and fell to his knees, pressing down on his wound with his hand.

“Father! Why?! You should have been able to avoid my attack!” Julianne let go of the sword’s hilt and clung to Yon.

Did he use his own life to prove that his daughter wasn’t a traitor? There’d still been the option to flee with his family. What a fool.

Yon touched Julianne’s cheek with his bloodied hand. “Your strike was splendid. You have surpassed me.” Then he looked at me. His face was saying that his daughter was strong enough to defeat a knight and that, in killing him, she had proven her loyalty to House Girard.

Was that the form of a doting father? His love was so deep he could do things beyond an ordinary man.

I stood in front of Yon, the Vampire Sword still attached to my hand.

“Dear...” Julianne looked at me anxiously, her eyes wavering. She wanted me to save her father, but couldn’t voice it.

“I have a few questions, Ser Yon.”

“Yes...?”

“Why are you in this forest? Were you planning to betray me from the beginning?”

“An envoy from...Baron Dulac came...and told me everything,” he said between pained breaths.

If so, then that meant he hadn’t known beforehand. I was angry he had opposed me, but he was actually a victim too.

I wanted to ask more questions, but he was losing quite a lot of blood. At this rate, he might expire before he could answer everything, so we should heal him first. Unfortunately, the fifth-grade potion I had wouldn’t do much, and I couldn’t lend him the Vampire Sword either, as it was cursed and stuck to my hand.

“We need to heal you before we continue. Do you have a recovery potion?”

Yon shook his head. I guessed that he might have intended to die from the start. I respected his bravery, but not everyone was able to have that much resolve on the battlefield.

I turned toward Gwynt. “The fatso might have one! Search both of them with Adele! Quickly!”

If I was wrong and neither Spencer nor Erwalt had a potion, then Yon would die, so I decided to continue our conversation in the meanwhile.

“Tell me everything you know.”

“...Baron Dulac said he wanted to build a good relationship with the neighboring territory and told me to send Julianne’s portrait as a candidate to be your fiancée.”

“And you believed him?”

“Yes. I knew that the head of House Girard had changed, so I thought it was a natural thing to do. I suspected nothing.”

Once you became the new head, you had to prepare to make an heir. However, I wasn’t like all the other nobles and didn’t have a fiancée, so Baron Dulac’s excuse was sound. “I see. So Baron Dulac wanted to control House Girard through that marriage.”

“While it might have been one of his plans, I think he would not have minded if it had failed. Or rather, he might have expected it to fail from the beginning. After all, who would imagine that there was an aristocrat who would accept a woman with a scar as his wife?”

He was indirectly saying that I was an oddball, but I couldn’t deny it. “True.”

“To Baron Dulac, the result did not matter as long as I was able to enter the Girard territory.”

He had deceived House Froid and me to create an excuse to enter my domain —the worst kind of plan that toyed with people’s hearts. Looking at Julianne’s sorrowful face made me even more irritated at Baron Dulac.

“When returning home from your mansion, I met the baron’s envoy. Then I joined with the Welza Company and came to this forest.”

“What were you planning to do here?”

“We—” Yon, who had thus far endured the pain, finally couldn’t bear it anymore and started coughing and vomiting blood.

I looked at Gwynt, hopeful they’d found the potion by now, and saw that he had been searching Spencer to the point of stripping him entirely.

“Did you find anything?!”

“Yes! Here!” Gwynt showed me a bottle with red liquid inside. I didn’t know what grade it was, but he was the precious heir of the Welza Company, so it should be at least fourth-grade or above. Not that we had the time to worry about it.

“Throw it here!”

“Y-Yes!” He threw the bottle and I caught it gently to not break it.

“Pull the sword out,” I said to Julianne as I opened the bottle.

She skillfully removed Yon’s armor, but when she put her hand on the sword’s hilt to pull it out, her father stopped her.

You may want to die, but I won’t let you!

“Julianne!”

“Yes!”

She ignored Yon trying to hinder her and pulled the blade out of his abdomen. Then she pinned him down to stop him from struggling. I immediately poured the potion on his wound and the hole closed little by little as if turning time back. If it was that potent, then even if it was a fourth-grade potion, it must have been of truly good quality.

“I betrayed your expectations...to protect my family... I should die here...” Yon said between pained breaths.

“Shut up!”

What? You want to say you obeyed that shitty plan for your wife still in the Dulac territory? Well, I don’t care! I won’t allow you to die as a convenient tool deceived by Baron Dulac. Aren’t you frustrated? You were betrayed by the man you pledged your loyalty to! Don’t use your family as an excuse—fight back!

“I don’t care what you think. I’m just saving the father of my future wife.”

If I dealt with Yon as a traitor, that would create a rift between Julianne and me. And as time passed, it might become the motive to make her betray me.

And, more than anything, I didn’t like an ending where he would die because of betrayal. The only fate awaiting traitors was vengeance, so Yon shouldn’t die here.

A few minutes later, his breathing was back in order. His complexion was still bad, but at least his condition was stable. He wouldn’t die anymore, but he still needed to rest for a while to restore his stamina.

“Let’s get back to our conversation. What exactly were you doing here?” I didn’t intend to stop my questioning until I knew what Baron Dulac’s underlings

were doing in this forest.

“We were asked to kill you, or if that failed, to control monsters to destroy the village. We never expected you to forestall us and attack our hiding place, however.”

A two-stage plan, huh? With the lizardmen, he had prioritized Third Village’s annihilation, but this time the priority was my life. The reason that destroying the village worked as an assurance was, of course, that it’d do economic and human damage to my domain. That way, he could make his next move.

“Then Baron Dulac would instigate my people to provoke a revolt. Something like that?”

If my demesne ruined itself, it would become a blank area and Baron Dulac would be able to take it over. Moreover, if I died but Julianne—my fiancée—didn’t, he wouldn’t have to fear the royal family or other nobles butting in and could use her to control the domain the hero oh so coveted. Then he would be able to investigate the Girard territory at his leisure or use it to negotiate with Seravimia if it was too much trouble.

“I think so, yes...” Yon answered hesitantly. He had only been involved recently, so he wasn’t certain of the details. But his reply was good enough to know that my prediction wasn’t too far off.

“I get the gist, so now we can nego—” I was interrupted by the cries of monsters. The discussion would have to wait. “How are you controlling the monsters?”

“By using a slave collar on the master of the forest and having it lead its underlings to Fourth Village.”

I didn’t know what kind of monster it was, but this forest had a boss? It should be impossible to subdue strong monsters, but I guessed that humanoid shadows that could nullify attacks could make it possible.

“People really like to do whatever they want in my domain.” Far from calming down, I was getting angrier and angrier. I *really* wanted to go and defeat the idiots laying waste to my territory right this instant, but I couldn’t leave the immobile Yon on his own. I needed to ask Julianne to take care of him. As for

Gwynt, I'd have him watch over the Welza Company guys. "Adele, you're coming with me?"

"Of course!"

Ultimately, I ended up relying on the strongest character whom I always used: Adele. As long as she was with me, I was sure I could overcome any hardship.

"Good reply."

She was motivated, so all that was left was to give her better weapons. I took out the Twin Hydra Blades from my bag and tossed them over.

"Why are you giving these to me...?"

"There's a ton of monsters, and they're strong. So don't be difficult like you were last time. Just take them."

Her crimson twin swords weren't good enough. She had refused once, but she really should be the one to use the Twin Hydra Blades.

"But what about you, Master Jack?"

Her question was justified. We were going to fight powerful monsters, and the simple dual swords I had been using were broken. I hadn't brought any other weapons either.

"Well, I have this." I showed her the dangerous Vampire Sword. It had a recovery effect, so it was perfect for long battles and should be a great boon when facing a large number of monsters. It corroded my mind, though, so I'd have to use willpower and guts to endure.

"...Understood. I shall use the Twin Hydra Blades. So please, do not lose to that sword. I will not forgive you if you fall under its spell again. In fact, I will beat you up until you regain your senses."

I certainly didn't want that to happen. Even if my body was taken over, I now had a reason to definitely take it back.

"...Lord Jack," Julianne muttered. I could feel from her voice that she wanted to stop me, but couldn't. I had pegged her as a sort of wild boar, always wanting to fight, but she *did* understand her position.

I drew near her and clapped her on the shoulder. “I won’t lose,” I declared. “I’m leaving Ser Yon to you.”

“Please do not make me a widow.”

Hey, don’t be so hasty. We’re not even married yet. She was on the verge of tears, so I couldn’t say that aloud. Instead, I lightly patted her head, gave her a noncommittal reply, and walked away.

I joined up with Adele and started heading in the direction of the monsters, but Gwynt stood in our way.

“Please let go of this sword. It is too dangerous!” he cried, tears in his eyes and black mist coming out of his body.

“I’ll be fine.” I ignored his attempt to stop me and walked past him, but the black mist coiled itself around me. It tried to erode my mind and tempt me, but I psyched myself up and resisted it. It was nothing compared to the Vampire Sword. “Don’t let the guys from the Welza Company escape,” I ordered Gwynt before continuing on.

With all I had said just now, I’d really lose face if I didn’t win against this damn cursed weapon.

Chapter 6: Slave Collar

"I shall go ahead!" Adele ran off, and I followed after her.

After a while, we reached the source of the cries and found goblins. They were among the weakest kinds of monsters, so these were probably only the vanguard—stronger monsters were waiting deeper in the forest.

There were dozens of goblins, but Adele didn't hesitate to dive into the fray and chopped and poisoned them one after another, not giving me a chance to participate as she piled up corpses. She didn't kill them all, of course, but she took care of enough of them that Julianne, Gwynt, and the adventurers at Fourth Village should be able to deal with the rest.

We started to run again, hurrying deeper into the forest until we arrived at a clearing. At the center was a certain monster. It—no, *she* wore a dress blending green and yellow and had beautiful, long, and lustrous green hair. Her childish looks tickled some sort of protective desire inside me, but the mana she exuded screamed at me to not lower my guard.

I immediately realized what she was: a tree spirit—a dryad.

In *Survival Strategies of a Corrupt Aristocrat*, they were obsessive beings that abducted men they took a liking to. They were also famous for taking revenge against people destroying nature, bringing their subordinate monsters with them. I'd had to deal with the shitty event where you earned the ire of a dryad while slaughtering the trash in a forest quite a few times, but I hadn't known there was one in Fourth Village's forest.

They were usually rather docile as long as you didn't damage nature, but this one was clearly hostile toward Adele and me. The reason was most likely the slave collar around her neck, which meant she was the boss of the forest Yon had mentioned. Three chains were attached to the collar, and each one was held by a humanoid shadow. The chains had a red pattern on them, so I guessed that they must be enchanted with some magical effect. There should be three guys holding black crystals controlling them nearby, but I couldn't find them among the trees.



“Only death awaits you for laying waste to my forest,” the dryad declared in an unexpectedly mature and icy voice.

Unicorns—horned white horses—goblins, ogres, man-eating birds, and other monsters emerged into the clearing from the forest. They were too many to count.

“What should we do?” Adele asked.

I couldn’t predict what the monsters would do if the dryad—the one controlling them—disappeared. In the worst case they would attack Fourth Village, so our goal shouldn’t be to defeat the dryad, but the scoundrels behind everything.

“I’ll take care of the monsters here. You go find the ones manipulating the shadows and kill them.”

“This is too dangerous!” Adele objected to me playing the decoy. In my opinion, considering I could heal with the Vampire Sword, it was the plan with the best survival rate.

“I’m the disciple of the strongest master. As if I would lose against a few monsters.” I grinned confidently to reassure her, but it didn’t work, and Adele was still looking at me anxiously. Words weren’t enough to convince her. “I’m not weak anymore!” I exclaimed, and so I decided to convince her through my actions.

I swung the Vampire Sword horizontally at the nearby goblins, and it was so sharp that it easily cut three down. I followed with a thrust and impaled another through its skull. I waved my blade to throw the corpse away and prepared for the incoming ogres.

“See that? I’m strong!”

I was actually scared to be surrounded by tons of monsters, but I held down my fear with willpower. I was the disciple of the strongest character, ergo I was the strongest too. I had to prove that to Adele if I wanted her to do what I had asked her.

“Master Jack!”

“If you have the time to yell my name, then go find the ones manipulating the humanoid shadows!”

“But I—”

“You’re my master, you can do it! You can take care of all of them before anything happens to me! Don’t disappoint me!” Unfortunately, that was all I could say before having to focus back on battle.

On my left and right were ogres, and in front was a five-meter tall tree monster that used its branches to attack—a treant. I was surrounded.

I realized it would be impossible to escape this unharmed and leaped forward. I heard the sound of a club hitting the ground behind me as I twisted my body to avoid the branches with pointed ends like spears assaulting me. Unfortunately, I missed one, and it pierced my left shoulder.

I cut the branch with the Vampire Sword, then swung it down at the treant. It tried to protect itself with its other branches, but they were nothing against the sharp blade, and I vertically bisected its trunk.

Treants didn’t have blood, so I couldn’t heal the hole in my left shoulder with my sword. I endured the pain and turned back, only to find an ogre swinging its club at my side. I couldn’t dodge to the rear because of the treant’s remains, and jumping would make me an easy target for the other ogre.

“Shadow Walk.”

So I used magic to sink into my shadow, came out from behind the ogre attacking me, and impaled it. This time, the grooves carved on the blade throbbed as they sucked the monster’s green blood. My shoulder healed as green flowers bloomed on the blade. The Vampire Sword tried to make me a bloodsucking fiend once again, but I resisted the urge through sheer will.

I’m not a villain just for show! As if I’d lose to a mere curse!

Once I finished relieving the ogre of its blood, I pulled the sword out and avoided the club aiming for my head by jumping to the side. Then I stabbed the other ogre’s arm and started draining it too. Unfortunately the wound was shallow, and the ogre quickly took some distance, vigilant against the strange attack. I couldn’t get much blood from that exchange.

Finally able to take a breather, I glanced at where Adele had been and saw that she wasn't there anymore. She had finally resolved herself to act.

I hope she finds the guys controlling the shadows quickly, I thought, as I stared at the incoming flock of man-eating birds.

* * *

"You're my master, you can do it! You can take care of all of them before anything happens to me! Don't disappoint me!"

I was a failure for making Master Jack—the man who had recognized my worth—say that, but it wasn't the time to regret and reflect on myself. I had to believe in Master Jack and search for the ones controlling the humanoid shadows.

There was no doubt that they were observing the situation while hidden. They were cowards, and I would definitely find and kill them.

I crouched behind a tree and closed my eyes. I strained my ears, hearing the screams of the ogres, Master Jack's breathing, and the dryad giving orders to her underlings, and many more sounds besides. Amid all this noise, I wouldn't be able to find anyone trying to hide. The scent of the plants was too strong, so I couldn't use my nose to find them from afar either.

I didn't know how long Master Jack would be able to endure against so many monsters, so I couldn't waste time. I had to hurry.

I opened my eyes and stood up. I glanced at Master Jack and saw him defeat an ogre. He sucked its blood, but it didn't seem like the Vampire Sword took over his mind. He was properly controlling it as its owner.

Master Jack is really amazing! I can't lose. Wanting to reward Master Jack for believing in me and my pride as his instructor raised my spirits.

"The humanoid shadows aren't moving. Why? If they attacked Master Jack as well, he would be cornered."

It had only been a slight suspicion at first, but voicing my doubts reinforced it. What reason could there be to not move the humanoid shadows? I put myself in the shoes of the ones controlling them and immediately understood: they

were in a safe place surrounded by trees, so their vision was obstructed and they would lose sight of the shadows if they moved them.

I searched for a place where you could see the shadows but would lose sight of them if they moved, and quickly found a prime candidate. I discreetly climbed a tree and jumped from branch to branch in that direction. As I drew closer, I started to smell the scent of people and finally found a group. However, only one person was holding a black crystal.

Maybe they had dispersed in case someone found them? Anyway, they were only four—the person with the black crystal and three guards—so I could take care of them in an instant.

I drew the Twin Hydra Blades that Master Jack had lent me. Like the first time I had held them, I felt like they fit my hands perfectly. It was a really strange sensation, as if they had been made just for me, and the hilts were the perfect form and length that made them easy to use.

After pouring mana into the swords and confirming that they were coated with the lesser version of the hydra's poison, I jumped off the tree.

"You—"

I stabbed the man who had been going to speak and ran off.

My target is that woman with the black crystal!

I bent forward and ran as if gliding across the ground. The other two guards swung their swords at me, but they were too slow. I passed right through them and impaled the astonished woman through the neck. Even without the poison, that was a fatal injury. I pulled out my blade, turned back, then cut at the two guards. The hydra's poison worked quickly, and they frothed from their mouths before dying.

What terrifying weapons... They were so good that I feared my sword skills would rust if I used them too much. No wonder they were part of an aristocrat's treasure vault. The fact I was allowed to use them made me realize how deep Master Jack's affection for me ran.

He also gave me his important ring, so I'm above Julianne. She came out of nowhere, after all! Yep, I'm definitely above her!

But now wasn’t the time for such useless thoughts.

“I have to find and kill the others.”

I have to be quick, or they might flee!

Thanks to the disappearance of one of the humanoid shadows, I began to hear agitated voices and rough breathing. Just as Master Jack had said, there were multiple culprits.

Maybe their control over the dryad had weakened, as she started to attack the two remaining shadows, but she didn’t manage to damage them.

I had to quickly kill the enemies before they escaped, so I stopped trying to be discreet and ran at full speed. I soon found a man with a black crystal and headed for him, ignoring his guards, then stabbed him with one of my Twin Hydra Blades. Knowing he would die from the poison anyway, I turned back before even seeing him collapse and slashed at the guards.

They were weak. They didn’t even get the chance to counterattack as they suffered from the poison invading their bodies. That was their punishment for laying waste to Master Jack’s territory. I wanted to torment them more, but I had others left to kill, so I couldn’t. They were pretty lucky.

I strained my ears and found the last group nearby.

“There.”

They were behind a tree with its trunk separated in two. I went around silently to take them from behind. The one with a black crystal was an old man, and there were five guards with him. They had noticed that someone was killing their allies, so the guards were surrounding the old man to protect him. They seemed stronger than the others, so it might take me a little longer—not that I would lose, mind you.

However, the moment I took a step forward to kill them...

“I won’t forgive you!” the voice of the woman I didn’t like—Julianne—echoed through the air.

I turned toward the sound and discovered that she had burst into the clearing where Master Jack was fighting and had joined the fray.

Huh, what? You ignored Master Jack's orders! I'm *the one who won't forgive* you*!*

I had to kill these guys quickly and go back to Master Jack!

* * *

As I was dodging a lump of ice fired from the horn of a unicorn after I'd slain a few goblins and ogres, Julianne suddenly appeared wielding Yon's short spear.

"Why are you here?!" I yelled. I was still fighting against the Vampire Sword trying to take over my mind as it sucked green blood.

Julianne stood next to me after impaling the skull of a man-eating bird. "My father told me to go help my future husband."

The father is just as hasty as the daughter, huh? Not that I currently intended to break our engagement, but I hadn't decided to marry her either. Things would depend on how the conversation went after we finished this battle.

"Is Ser Yon all right?"

"Well enough to deal with goblins using my sword."

He's recovered enough to fight in such a short time? Even though he lost a lot of blood... This world's people are really tough.

Well, to be honest, I was having a hard time because of the sheer number of enemies, so Julianne's addition was a great help. As a spear user, she shouldn't have any problem with a short spear, so she should be a decent reinforcement.

"Got it. You did well coming here." I praised her for not being just obedient, but able to act on her own judgment too. She smiled happily as she dexterously slaughtered another monster.

Finally able to take a breather, I observed my surroundings. The humanoid shadows had vanished, and the red pattern on the chains attached to the dryad's collar had disappeared. That meant that she was likely no longer under its power.

The dryad tore off the collar from her neck and threw it away, then shot me a killer glare. "To think I'd suffer such humiliation..."

She didn’t seem happy to have been manipulated. To put it another way, she wasn’t exactly the spitting image of the typical gentle dryad and was instead completely enraged. She wouldn’t listen to me like this.

“I must redeem myself from this disgrace.”

Just like I didn’t perceive goblins as individuals, monsters and spirits grouped humans together unless they had a personal grudge. In short, even if I told her that I had nothing to do with what had happened to her, she wouldn’t care. I was human, just like the people from the Welza Company, ergo I was a target of her vengeance.

Unfortunately, killing her wouldn’t solve the problem. If the spirit working as the boss of the forest died, there would be no one to command the monsters, and they would rampage. The situation might even get worse than it currently was.

“Die,” the dryad declared, as her mana suddenly swelled.

Dozens of vines of ivy sprouted from the ground under her and entwined themselves to form a thick spear coming my way. It was physically impossible to block or parry, and I didn’t have the time to use magic, so I rolled forward to let it pass above me. However, she must have known I would do that because when I looked back up, a few thin vines awaited me. I tried to move my legs, but my muscles didn’t operate as I wanted, and I knew I wouldn’t be able to dodge in time.

As I was hesitating between trying to use magic or receiving the attack in a way to protect my vitals, Adele appeared, crimson hair fluttering behind her, and cut down every vine before they could reach me.

“Thanks!”

That would usually make her happy, but she was frowning and looked angry. Maybe her mana was going a little out of control, as her hair was floating in midair a little. I didn’t think I was imagining things.

“Master Jack!”

“Y-Yeah?” I would rather she fight the dryad than talk with me, but she didn’t seem to be in the mood to hear that. The pressure she exuded was different

from usual.

“Why is that woman here?”

I figured that she was talking about Julianne and wasn’t happy that she had ignored my order. It wasn’t the time to have another quarrel, so I quickly explained. “Ser Yon recovered enough to fight, so she came to help.”

“Tch.”

She clicked her tongue! Their relationship might be even worse than I had imagined. I would need to take some measures if I wanted to prevent an internal rift from forming in the group. However, it wasn’t something I could think about now. We had to deal with the enemy before us first.

“The three of us are fighting together,” I said firmly.

“...Understood,” Adele replied reluctantly, as she cut down another slew of attacking ivy vines. She didn’t like the idea, but not to the point of opposing me.

Jeez, you two should at least try to get along.

“Let’s go.” I focused back on the fight and ran toward the dryad.

A giant treant—probably summoned via magic—suddenly appeared, so I halted. Its branches full of leaves stretched toward me.

“I shall defeat it.” Adele overtook me and cut off the branches with her Twin Hydra Blades, marking herself as its opponent. With her high speed, she toyed with the treant, not letting it get a chance to counterattack. She pruned it, not even allowing it to make a move. Her battle style was something I could never imitate.

“I would expect nothing less from Adele. It’s reassuring to have her on my side.”

“I can do the same,” Julianne said, puffing her cheeks. Before I knew it, she had moved up next to me.

“Then prove your words through action,” I replied, pointing the Vampire Sword toward a unicorn. It was staying next to the dryad as if saying that protecting her was its duty. It was a hindrance, and it was a good match for her weapon, so I decided to leave it to Julianne.

“Certainly! Please watch me, Dear!” She flashed a belligerent smile, then rushed toward the unicorn.

Taunting her had worked well, and I could feel how much she didn’t want to lose to Adele. I was on my way to fight the dryad, though, so I wouldn’t be watching her. Not that she would notice in her state.

However, just as I started to focus on the dryad and took a step forward, I heard jeers and couldn’t help but turn toward the noise.

“I’m Master Jack’s teacher and guard! You’re not related to any of this, so just butt out!”

“I’m going to become his wife! You’re not part of the family, so *you’re* the unrelated one!”

“It’s not decided yet if you’ll really become his wife! I have a closer relationship with Master Jack than you!”

“Oh no you don’t! I’m already far closer to him than you are!”

They were quarreling in the midst of battle.

Are you freaking children?! The level of their dispute was so low that I really wanted to throw a retort. If they hadn’t kept up their respective fights in the meantime, I would have scolded them.

Although Adele seemed stronger, Julianne didn’t appear in the game, so I had no idea about her overall potential. In fact, it was even possible that she could surpass Adele in the future. If they could get along and collaborate, they would be truly heartening comrades to have.

...I guess everything depends on me. I didn’t know if I would be able to handle these two unruly women well enough, but it should be easier than defeating Seravimia and the surrounding nobles. Actually, considering the reason for their squabble was their devotion to me, they were quite adorable.

“Sorry for the wait.” Thanks to the other two taking care of the other monsters, I could face off with the dryad without any interruptions. We silently glared at each other, ignoring the cries and jeers around us.

“To think a mere human would try to control me. Atone for this crime with

your death," she said, her voice pregnant with quiet anger.

The next instant, the branches of the trees around us stretched toward me. Their tips were like spears and would probably easily pierce through my armor. I predicted their trajectories and jumped to a safe zone. When I looked back to where I had been, dozens of branches were stabbing into the ground.

"It seems you have some mettle, but will you be able to avoid this?" The rage must have made her forget the docile personality dryads usually had, because she was quite belligerent—smiling, even, and enjoying the battle.

The scattered leaves on the ground suddenly floated into the air and started spinning as well. I guessed that she was using the spell *Leaf Cutter* that fired leaves like shuriken. There were a lot of them, so it wouldn't be as easy as it had been earlier to dodge.

A few spinning leaves rapidly flew at me from the front, so I dodged from side to side, but the dryad had predicted where I would end up and the last one was unavoidable. I instantly knocked it down with the Vampire Sword, a high-pitched metallic sound resonating from the impact, then the leaf stabbed into the ground.

...So it also hardens the leaves, huh?

"You'll die if you stop, you know?" She taunted me.

I crouched to avoid the leaves that flew my way from the right and left, then I used the momentum from standing up to make a big leap backward and dodge the ones aiming at me from above. More came from behind, so I did a half-spin while swinging my blade horizontally to parry them.

I glanced at the dryad, preparing to counterattack, but I was only greeted by another slew of leaves. Was she going for victory through sheer quantity? Moreover, all of her attacks were guaranteed to overpower my armor. It made me regret picking a fight inside the forest a little.

"Just die already and apologize."

A mass of spinning leaves flew toward me from the front. Avoiding them or using the Vampire Sword to parry was impossible. Of course, stopping them with my body wasn't even an option. So all that was left was to use magic just

before being hit.

“Shadow Walk.”

I sank into my shadow and emerged from the one of the trees just behind the dryad. There were less than two meters between us—she was in my range. I wanted to reach her before she could notice me and decided to go for a thrust. I took a big step forward and extended my arm, but before the tip of my blade could reach her, a tree suddenly grew from the ground and blocked it.

“I saw this spell before. When was it...” The dryad tilted her head pensively.

Having failed my surprise attack, I stepped back to take some distance. “Did you meet another guy who uses shadow magic?”

From the game’s setting, I knew that magic attributes were hereditary. House Girard’s specialty was shadow magic and had spells such as *Shadow Sleep* and *Shadow Bind* that I could use too. However, the number of spells you could learn depended on your talent, and I heard that people from the same family often ended up learning different spells because of that.

“Uh-huh, I did. And I think I know that sword too.”

I hadn’t expected her to answer. Maybe she had calmed down some, as her tone was a little softer than before. I figured that attacking had helped to vent her anger. I should use the opportunity to clear up the misunderstanding.

“Maybe it was my ance—”

“Oh, well. Whatever. Just die.”

It had been overly optimistic of me to think that I could negotiate with a spirit, and she prepared to resume combat before I could even finish my sentence. Her mana swelled greatly, and I guessed she was readying a large-scale spell. I couldn’t leave without Julianne and Adele, so I resolved myself to endure what was coming.

“What’s that smell...?” Blue petals danced around me, and their scent sapped the strength from my body and made me drowsy. I fell to my knees, using the Vampire Sword as support. Looking at the ground, I noticed dark red mushrooms that were releasing white spores.

“I summoned special plants just for you, so enjoy.”

I wanted to yell at her, but my mouth didn’t move. Or my body, for that matter. I tried and tried, but my legs didn’t obey me.

The dryad was looking down on me, her arms crossed and doing nothing else. I had to get up before she acted. I released all the mana in my mana-storing organs to strengthen my body and tried to stand up again, but all it did was make me groan from the sudden pain that assaulted me. It wasn’t just my legs; my entire body hurt as if I was being violated from the inside. Something was slowly corroding my body.

“The spores emitted by these mushrooms are parasites that rob living beings of their mobility. Once infected, you won’t be able to move ever again.”

The hell?! Why are you using such a brutal spell on me?!

I had never encountered magic like this in *Survival Strategies of a Corrupt Aristocrat.* I didn’t know if it only existed in this world, or if I just hadn’t known it and it actually existed in the background setting, but I had to get away as fast as possible. I felt like I would lose consciousness in a few minutes.

“I won’t lose!” I shouted, enduring the pain as I put strength into my legs. The spores must have already invaded my body, though, because my body refused to move at all. My consciousness gradually dimmed, and my vision blurred.

Well, I did *take over Jack’s body, so I guess this is a fitting end for me...*

—Then give it to me.

A woman’s voice resounded in my head, and my right hand throbbed. Moving only my eyeballs, I glanced at the back of my right hand and saw that the red flower on it was shining with a pale light. Was the Vampire Sword trying to take over my body like it had in the ruins? I didn’t have the strength to resist right now.

Why am I not popular with normal women? Why do I just attract all the weird ones?

—If you lend me your body, I’ll make quick work of these mushrooms.

That sounded like a pact with the devil. But I didn’t really have a choice here.

If I was going to die anyway, I might as well bet on the Vampire Sword.

I hope you'll keep your word. I'm only lending *you my body for a while.* I sent my thoughts to the Vampire Sword as I allowed it to take over my body.

—Of course.

A lump of mana invaded me from my right hand, and I lost consciousness.

* * *

I found myself looking at a stone castle in a forest from above. It was similar to the western castles I had seen in photos in my past life, but some of its walls were destroyed, and its ceiling was filled with holes. I could see numerous bodies of both humans and monsters through those holes, so I figured an intense battle must have happened.

Suddenly, my vision shifted, and I was inside the castle.

An old man who resembled Jack was facing a woman with long hair as black as night and bloodred eyes. The old man was holding a longsword, and the crest of the first head of House Girard was painted on his armor. Well, it was already obvious from his face, but basically, it was my ancestor. As for the woman, she was wearing a black dress, and her nails were eerily long.

“I’m going to kill you and free these lands from monsters,” the founder said.

“You’re quite impertinent for a mere human,” the woman replied.

My vision then suddenly blurred, and I couldn’t hear anything anymore. It was as if I was watching a broken TV. The scenery kept changing: the founder cutting the woman with his longsword; the woman severing my ancestor’s left arm with her nails; scenes like these flickered across my mind. It seemed like they were talking sometimes, but I couldn’t hear anything.

As I was thinking about how useless this projection was, my vision suddenly cleared and I could hear again.

The woman had been decapitated by my ancestor, and her head was rolling across the ground. What was shocking was that even then, she was still alive and continued talking normally.

“I never imagined you’d be able to push a vampire such as myself so far.”

“Just die already.” The founder ignored her and readied his blade to impale her head.

However, the woman’s eyes gleamed red, and her body transformed into a black mist that coiled itself around my ancestor’s sword.

“Wh-What are you doing?!” He tried to cut the mist, but it did nothing as the

sword gradually absorbed it.

"I shall enter your sword and curse your lineage. Once I have recovered from my injuries, I'll take everything." Her head also transformed into black mist and entered the sword.

When the mist disappeared, a pattern appeared on the back of the founder's right hand—just like what had happened to me—and his longsword had become the Vampire Sword.

* * *

When I came back to myself, the dryad was before me, lacerated from her shoulder to her abdomen. There was no blood, though. Only her green flesh was visible.

My body moved on its own and raised the Vampire Sword overhead. I still hadn't taken back control.

Based on the projection I had seen earlier, the one manipulating my body must be the woman—the vampire the founder had defeated. She had cursed the sword and was living inside it to take over the body of its user. How crazy was she to think of something like that?

As for why my body could move again despite the spores, I guessed it was thanks to the healing ability of vampires. Perhaps Seravimia would have a better handle on this situation.

Give me back my body. I sent my thoughts to the vampire, but she ignored me.

I could feel that my body was being moved by the mana coming from the Vampire Sword, so I guessed that I could take control back if I pushed it out. The dryad was going to receive the coup de grâce, so I quickly gathered my mana from all over my body and rejected the vampire's. Just as I had expected, my body stopped moving, and the Vampire Sword didn't reach the dryad.

—I won't give it back.

Or so she said, but it wasn't like that was going to stop me. I remembered Adele's encouragement and focused on how much I didn't want to lose to the

vampire with all my heart. Maybe all the years she had spent inside the sword had weakened her, as I felt less resistance than I had expected. I pushed her mana out and gradually took back control of my body.

—Stop!

I heard her frail voice one last time before the last drop of her mana left my body. It had taken me around ten seconds, but I was finally back in control.

“I see that you’re yourself again... So, what do you plan to do now?” the dryad asked as ivy came out of her wound, reconnecting the two parts of her body.

Hmmm. She isn’t attacking me and is prioritizing healing herself. She seems calm enough now, so maybe we can finally talk.

“Nothing. My comrade took care of the ones manipulating you, so could you go back now?” I needed her to rule the monsters in the forest, so I was ready to make some compromises.

“I won’t. You intend to attack once I have lowered my guard, no? I won’t be deceived again.”

That damn Welza Company. They must have tricked her and captured her by surprise. Thanks to that, she wasn’t very prone to trust anymore.

They’re a real pain. I’m definitely gonna give them a fitting punishment!

“I’m the ruler of these lands. If the leader of the forest dies, it would cause major issues for me. I gain nothing from your death.”

“...Can you prove that?”

“No. But my comrade *did* free you, so I hope you’ll believe me.”

The dryad fell silent. She wasn’t stupid, so by now, she should understand that I didn’t want to become her enemy. However, her feelings were another matter, thus the silence.

After a few seconds, her glare went from me to the Vampire Sword, then to my right hand. “Where did you find that sword?”

Unlike people, spirits shouldn’t be interested in material things, but was she different? Her reaction was unusual, so I decided to probe her a little.

“In some ruins in the forest.”

“Ruins?”

Did spirits not know what ruins were? Cross-cultural communication wasn’t easy.

“There’s a destroyed building in the forest. Don’t you know about it?”

“I do. There are quite a few, actually.”

Oh, there were? Good to know. Once things calmed down, it might be interesting to explore them. “It was inside one of those.”

“It should have been sealed inside a stone box. How did you open it?”

“It opened on its own when I touched it,” I replied before adding a snide remark. “Jeez, you’d think they would’ve used a better seal if the thing was cursed.”

Spirits had a long life span, so it wouldn’t surprise me if she had met my ancestor. I was more shocked about the seal.

If you knew how dangerous that sword was, then don’t leave it to your descendants and get rid of it yourself! Or at least leave a warning note or something. I don’t need a cursed weapon as a surprise present.

“If you could dispel the seal...that means you are *his* blood relative.” The dryad had said something quite suggestive while I was complaining to the founder inside my head. I could feel the hostility and bloodlust she had directed at me during our conversation quickly vanishing.

“Do you mean the first Girard?”

“I don’t know his name, but he had that sword with him.”

“Then yeah, I’m his descendant.”

“Hmmmmm.” She hummed and drew closer to me, her hands behind her back.

I didn’t sense any hostility, and I was curious to see what she would do, so I didn’t interrupt.

She touched my right hand. “The sword has started to assimilate into your

body. Just like him, you can't separate from it anymore."

"Will I have to live my whole life holding it?" That would be quite the issue. I could deal with going to the bathroom and taking a bath with one hand, but there were a lot of places you couldn't go if you carried a weapon, so that would greatly restrict my movements as an aristocrat. How could I negotiate with anyone if I was always drawing a blade in front of them?

"No, it's not that serious yet. It feels as if the sword is going easy on you." She put her lips on the red flower on the back of my right hand, and I felt a sort of electric shock run through me.

"What did you do?"

"You should be able to let go of the sword now."

I sheathed the Vampire Sword and successfully let go of the hilt that had thus far been stuck to my hand. The curse's effect had completely vanished, and the whole process went without a hitch.

"Thanks for the help..." I didn't know what she had done, but she was obviously far more favorable toward me since she had learned that I was the descendant of House Girard's founder.

"But you can't throw it away or distance yourself from it. If you do, the curse will strengthen. Also, if you try to break the curse it will kill you, so be careful."

As a test, I thought about throwing it, but I immediately felt intense pain in my right hand. The red flower on the back of my right hand had turned black. It appeared that there was a sort of magical link between the sword and me that it could use to attack me.

If what the dryad had said was true and trying to dispel the curse would kill me, then this blade was quite troublesome indeed...

"What's the deal with this damn cursed sword anyway?"

I didn't have many clues to go on, so I hoped that the dryad, who had lived in the forest for centuries, would know something about it.

"When I met that interesting man he already had it, so I don't know anything about it, but... I think he mentioned a tenacious, jealous woman."

If she considered the first Girard an interesting man, that meant that they must have gotten along. There wasn't a single word about it passed down in House Girard, so that was quite surprising. However, having the cooperation of a dryad would explain how the village could stay safe even next to a forest full of monsters. Perhaps that was how the world had corrected the contradiction from the game.

Still, the first Girard must really have had a turbulent life to have a vampire haunt him. "What kind of guy was my ancestor?"

"He used this sword to make these lands a safe dwelling for the people."

So he used the Vampire Sword to reclaim areas infested by monsters. It made sense—as long as you could resist it taking over your mind and body, its recovery ability was a great help. "Then why did he leave this forest full of monsters?"

"I don't know." While spirits could have an interest in individuals, they didn't care about human society. So if she said she didn't know, then she didn't.

"...You know, you resemble him." She suddenly drew her face close to mine and looked at me from below. She smelled like the forest, but I didn't hate the scent. "Your eyes, in particular. They're the same... They're fantastic."

I was infamous for having a mean look, so I didn't expect her to praise that. Dryads sure had strange tastes. I stayed on guard, not knowing what she would do next, but she stepped back.

"For your sake, I'll withdraw for today. However..." Her gentle expression twisted to rage. Was it prejudiced of me to think it was very spiritlike of her to keep changing her personality like that? "I'll take the ones who have manipulated me and make nutrients out of them."

"They're dead already, so you can do as you like." In fact, using them as manure for the plants saved me the time it would take to dispose of the corpses, so I was actually grateful.

"Thank you." She turned her back to me, and ivy stretched from the ground until it had gathered a dozen or so corpses—the guys from the Welza Company that Adele had killed. They were the ones who had deceived the dryad and put

the slave collar on her. However, there was still something I was wondering: I didn't show proof that I was the descendant of the first Girard, so why didn't she think that I might deceive her too?

"Why did you believe me?"

The dryad stopped and replied without turning back. "That sword can only be obtained by one of that man's descendants. Also, your eyes are the same, and you didn't appear to be lying. So I decided to trust you." With that, she left.

The tattered treant and the unicorn, riddled with stab wounds, followed her. All the other monsters departed as well. With this, Fourth Village's crisis should have been averted.

In the game, you only needed to kill a certain number of monsters to resolve the issue, so I hadn't known the actual cause, but perhaps it was because of the dryad's rampage...or not. The scenario had gone awry because of Seravimia, and that was what led the dryad to appear, even if she didn't in *Survival Strategies of a Corrupt Aristocrat.*

Then there were the ruins where the first Girard had been buried and the Vampire Sword too. There hadn't been any mention of them in the game, but maybe they were part of some secret backstory only the creator knew. If so, while I didn't want to meet her again, I needed to ask Seravimia some questions the next time I got the chance to speak with her. She might be able to provide some answers.

"Master Jack!"

I turned toward the source of the voice and found Adele, carrying her Twin Hydra Blades with a scowl, and Julianne, crossing her arms with her short spear stabbed in the ground next to her.

Those two were supposed to still be fighting—why did it seem like they'd reached a truce and were mad at *me* now? My instincts screamed that I was in danger.

"What?" I replied, unintentionally tense.

"What is your relationship with that woman?" Adele asked, referring to the dryad. The pressure emanating from her made it clear I couldn't refuse to

answer.

“I simply negotiated with the leader of the monsters. You should know that already.”

“You appeared quite intimate for mere negotiations. So please, explain to us what your exact relationship is,” Julianne added, looking displeased.

I would like to know the answer to that myself, but they wouldn’t agree if I said I didn’t know. “She’s acquainted with my ancestor, the first Girard. When I told her that I’m his descendant, she obediently agreed to withdraw. That’s all.”

“Really?”

“You should not lie to us.”

Adele and Julianne double-checked, just to be sure.

Jeez, just how distrustful are you? Though I guess I don’t dislike that part of you.

“Of course. I would never lie to you two,” I replied with a smile.

They must have believed me because the pressure finally dissipated. I had thought Julianne was a little firmer than Adele, but she was just as gullible. Well, I *did* like that about them too.

Thanks to the dryad leading the monsters back deep into the forest, Fourth Village’s predicament had been resolved. With the monster raid over, the village was now working toward its recovery. I compensated the adventurers and entrusted the rebuilding efforts to the village chief.

Protecting the village and providing financial support had raised my reputation in Fourth Village to the point that I figured I’d safely avoided the revolt bad ending flag entirely. However, that didn’t mean everything was fine either. After all, there was another flag nearby by the name of Baron Dulac. I wouldn’t feel safe until I took care of him.

Because of Seravimia, rumors had been circulating about something being hidden in the Girard territory, so other nobles were likely aiming for my domain too. As someone who wanted to live a luxurious and aristocratic life, I couldn’t

accept that.

I'll crush anyone who tries to steal what's mine, whoever they are.

Epilogue: The Welza Company's Final Moments

Back in the mansion, I walked through the corridor with the Vampire Sword hanging at my waist. Next to me, Kevin was shouldering Spencer—the heir of the Welza Company we had captured in the forest—who was bound with a rope.

We arrived in front of the parlor where Lumié was waiting for us.

"Sir Kyle is waiting for you," she said with a bow.

He was Spencer's father and the representative of the Welza Company. This meant that he was the one whom Baron Dulac had ordered to lay waste to my territory, and the one who had commanded his underlings to do what they did.

I had summoned him by saying I was keeping his son in custody. "Open the door."

"Certainly." Lumié obliged.

As I entered, I whispered to her to have soldiers guard the entrance of the room. She should be going to call Ludwig and his men now.

At the center of the parlor was a low table with a deep brown color that was sandwiched by two sofas. On the right one was a fat man wearing expensive clothes whose hands were plastered with jeweled rings. His hair was thin, and he must have been rather anxious since he was clearly agitated and sweating profusely.

The moment he noticed I had entered the room he stood up, preparing to bow, but stopped. "Baron Girard... What is the meaning of this?"

Well, yeah, obviously he would react like that if he saw his son tied up with a rope. I could reprimand him for not greeting me, but that would get us off topic, so I dropped it.

I walked to the free sofa and sat down, crossing my legs and resting my arms on the backrest.

“Kevin.” When I called his name, Kevin threw Spencer onto the floor. His mouth was gagged, so he couldn’t even scream.

“Baron Girard!” Kyle struck the low table, his face flushed with rage.

Quite rude for a commoner. I need to show him what happens when you underestimate me.

“What? You’ve got something to say?” I sneered at him, and his face got even redder. Considering his age, he was liable to pop a blood vessel at this rate.

“That is my son! Untie him!”

Oh? He’s got some nerve to order a noble around. I’m gonna teach him the difference in status between us.

“Why should I?”

“You’re just a rural baron! Don’t be so conceited!”

Hearing the new insult from Kyle, Kevin started to move, but I stopped him with a glance. *Don’t steal my fun.*

“And what are *you*? Do you mean to say that you’re above me?” I asked as I stood up and released my mana. When he saw me put a hand on the hilt of the Vampire Sword, he realized what I was planning to do.

“H-Hey! Do you know what will happen if you kill me?!”

“The distribution of goods in the territory will stop, and our economy will likely collapse.”

“If you know, then why—?!”

I drew the Vampire Sword and pointed it at him to shut him up. “I already have an idea of who to sign a contract with next. I have no use for you anymore.”

There was a talented merchant character in *Survival Strategies of a Corrupt Aristocrat*. He should arrive in my domain soon, so I could cut off my contract with the Welza Company without reservation.

“That’s impossible! Every other merchant thinks your territory is the worst because of those awful rumors! Nobody wants to come here!”

“Your intel is too old. The rumors should have changed now that the hero has reported to the royal family that there are no problems with my demesne. It shouldn’t be long before merchants come pouring into these lands.”

“There’s no way that something so convenient would—”

I pushed the tip of my blade against his forehead and made him shut his mouth. “Shut up. I don’t care about your opinion.”

He gulped nervously and waited for my next move.

Time to inform him of his crime and the punishment that comes with it.

“I know you want to defect to Baron Dulac and that you tried to destroy Third and Fourth Villages.”

He attempted to speak, but I applied some slight pressure to the Vampire Sword and the tip pierced his skin. Blood flowed from his forehead, and a voice asked me to suck it, but I shut the voice up with a sharp retort in my mind.

I noticed during the fight against the dryad that the Vampire Sword had a tendency to obey if I was firm and strong, so it was better to treat it crudely. Conversely, I was more prone to being taken over if my stamina and willpower were low, so I had to be careful.

“Now, for your punishment,” I started. The fate of my enemies was predetermined. *Listen carefully.* “You’ll tell me everything you know. Then after that, you’ll be imprisoned for the crime of causing damage to my territory.”

Kyle still had some uses, so I intended to keep him alive for a while and slowly have him spill all the information he possessed about Baron Dulac. Then once I was done, he would die—I would never budge on that. Fortunately, nobles were permitted to torture commoners, so no laws from the kingdom could hinder me.

Man, this world is so convenient for aristocrats.

Kyle was a traitor. He deserved to suffer and die, consumed by regret for making the wrong choice.

“What?! Baron Dulac will never allow that!”

Did he think I would get cold feet if he invoked my enemy? How foolish.

Moving soldiers cost money and needed a just cause, and saving the representative of the Welza Company—which was contracted to *me*—wasn't one. The royal family would never deem an attack on the Girard territory for such a reason acceptable. In fact, if he was too forceful, Seravimia would come after him.

"Your company is contracted to *me*, and the problems occurred in *my* domain. Baron Dulac has nothing to do with it."

Kyle gasped, at a loss for words. He finally realized he had only been a disposable pawn.

"Staying connected to me until the very end so you could collect intel has backfired on you."

I sheathed the Vampire Sword and clapped my hands twice. The door opened, and around ten soldiers entered the room. They wore metal armor that had been purchased with the money made from selling the lesser earth dragon's parts. While the guys inside were the same as usual, they looked strong and could pass for an upper noble's soldiers—in appearance, at least. Using looks to intimidate was pretty important and could even scare the enemy into surrendering without a single strike.

And, true enough, Kyle was so frightened that he couldn't even speak anymore.

"That man has instructed his son to destroy Third and Fourth Villages. Throw him in the barracks' dungeon!"

My soldiers' faces immediately contorted with anger. They were all born in the Girard territory, so they couldn't forgive Kyle for what he had done to their homeland. One of them even had his hand on his sword's hilt, ready to draw his blade.

"Ludwig."

"Yes, sir!"

"I need to question him later, so don't kill him." As the captain, his sense of duty should make him obey me. While he would let Kyle be treated roughly, he should stop anyone from actually killing him.

“Understood!” He saluted with his hand on his chest, then had the other soldiers restrain Kyle. The merchant struggled, trying to escape, but one of my men struck his face and that seemed to beat some obedience into him. He was good when taking the initiative, but not so much when on the back foot, apparently.

Once I’d watched him be dragged out of the room by both arms, I turned toward Kevin. “Take a soldier as an assistant and start questioning him tonight.”

Kevin was the most skilled man I had when it came to torture, but I didn’t trust him, so I decided to have someone monitor him. Moreover, it also worked as a way for that soldier to learn Kevin’s techniques at the same time. That way, I wouldn’t have to rely on Kevin for torture anymore, so I hoped the soldier would observe him well.

“Now it’s Spencer’s turn. Remove his gag,” I ordered, but Kevin kicked him in the stomach instead.

What the hell is he doing? I was so surprised by his sudden use of violence that I forgot to reprimand him.

“Don’t say anything unnecessary, and only answer what Master Jack asks you. Got it?”

Spencer mumbled something, but Kevin kicked him again.

“I’ll discipline you until you obey properly.”

Oh, I see. He’s threatening him to make the interrogation smoother. Now that I knew his reasoning, I could watch more calmly.

Spencer tried to resist a few times, but that only made Kevin’s attacks more fierce. Then finally, after a few more kicks, he lifted Spencer and threw him against the wall. That did the trick, and the glint of defiance in his eyes vanished.

Kevin removed his gag, and Spencer coughed up gastric juice.

“Look at how dirty you’ve made the carpet, Kevin. Think of another way for next time.”

“Certainly. I shall use a method that will not leave any stains next time.”

I totally spoke like a villain, but in the first place Jack *was* a villainous protagonist, so Kevin shouldn't find it weird.

Anyway, Spencer was scared enough, so it was time to question him.

"Don't worry, I won't throw you into prison. And, as long as you answer truthfully, you won't be tortured either." Kevin's "discipline" had worked well, and Spencer didn't interject. He was obediently waiting for me to continue. "However, you *did* damage my territory. You understand that I can't forgive that, right?"

"Yes..."

Spencer was lying face down on the floor, so I crouched and seized him by the hair to be able to meet his eyes.

"Hand over a hundred thousand gold coins, and we have a deal."

As far as I knew, that should be almost all the money the Welza Company possessed. Basically, I was asking him to sacrifice the company in exchange for his life.

So, are you going to betray the Welza Company and beg for your life? I'm eager to hear your choice.

"I can't move such a large sum without asking my father first..."

"What are you talking about? Your father is in prison and won't ever come out."

It had happened right in front of him, and yet he had already forgotten about it. Didn't he understand his position? No... Actually, it was more like he didn't *want* to. After all, he had been so close to accomplishing his goal of getting richer by defecting to Baron Dulac.

"Well, I don't mind if you refuse. I'll just crush the company after dealing with you."

I had no reason to let Spencer live, so it wouldn't be an issue to kill him here. I drew the Vampire Sword once again and thrust it toward him to see his reaction. He was so scared that his entire body trembled.

If he's reacting like this, he should accept my deal.

“So, what’s your answer?”

I waited for a while, then finally, Spencer muttered back. “I shall prepare a hundred thousand gold coins.”

“Good. Hand over twenty thousand today, and the rest within a month.”

“Th-That’s imposs—” It seemed he *still* didn’t understand his position, so I strengthened myself with mana and kicked him directly upward. He hit the ceiling and vomited again before crashing back down to the floor.

I’d held back, but that was still too much. I feared I had killed him for an instant, but I noticed that his chest was rising and falling, so he was still alive.

Phew, that was a close call.

“If you can’t, then you die. I’ll have Adele keep an eye on you, so don’t even think about running away.”

“Umbershtood.” He must have had difficulty moving his jaw because his voice was barely comprehensible. The despair on his face suggested he had realized that his only chance for survival was through total obedience.

If Spencer tried to rally others from the Welza Company to betray me, then Adele would just kill them all with the Twin Hydra Blades. Everything should go just as I had planned.

“Kevin, go inform Adele of her new task.”

“Certainly.” He bowed reverently, put Spencer over his shoulder, and exited the room.

That meant I was done with the Welza Company. All that was left was dealing with Yon. “Bring me Ser Yon,” I ordered Lumié, who was waiting by the door of the parlor.

I had nothing to do while waiting, so I drank black tea until he arrived. I remained seated, refusing to rise and greet him to indicate that he was not welcome. I wanted to see how he would react.

“I thank you for providing me the chance to explain myself,” he said.

“I don’t need your platitudes. Sit.”

Yon complied without complaint, settling onto the sofa in front of me. He glared at me...no, at the Vampire Sword, perhaps thinking that I might use it on him. He was in his plain clothes and unarmed, so I understood why he felt so cautious.

“I have no intention of killing my future father-in-law.”

It was rather funny to see a serious man like him frozen with his eyes wide open. This was a new discovery.

“Baron Dulac forced this role on you, correct? And if you refused to betray me, your wife would be in danger since she was still in the territory, so you had no choice but to accept and let Julianne kill you,” I said.

“...So you have figured it all out.”

It seemed my conjecture had been right. Amid the anguish of choosing between his family and his duty, the conclusion Yon had come to was to sacrifice himself to settle everything. Some might criticize him for being indecisive, but I considered him a truly diligent and earnest man, and I couldn’t help but like him.

“The way you acted made it very easy to understand, Ser Yon. Anyone would notice.”

“I see... I suppose I am not much of an actor,” he said with a smile.

Naturally, I returned it. I couldn’t ignore his attempt at a joke after all.

“So, what will become of me?” he asked calmly.

“Would you like to work for me?”

“No, thank you,” he immediately replied, clearly indicating that he wouldn’t budge on it.

I didn’t believe serving Baron Dulac was worthwhile, but that was from my point of view. As a knight, Yon had pledged his allegiance and chosen him as his master, so he couldn’t just change on a whim.

Yon was the type of man who would risk his life to offer counsel to his lord if he thought his lord had strayed from the right path. I admired that about him, but unfortunately, things didn’t always work out as we desired.

“I see. Well then, I guess that talk is over.”

“You do not mind?” He was surprised that I didn’t punish him and instead easily accepted his decision.

“No, I don’t. I know that you aren’t a man who would change his allegiance so readily.”

“Thank you very much.”

I figured that his gratitude was for my high opinion of him as a knight. I waved my hand to show that it was unnecessary, then resumed our conversation.

“By the way, I heard Julianne say that she was a little homesick. I guess being alone in an unfamiliar place is making her uneasy.” Yon appeared confused by the sudden change of topic, but I paid him no heed and continued. “I think she would feel better if she had her family by her side.”

“...Ah, I see,” he let out in realization.

I hadn’t even laid it all out, but he had already understood what I was planning to ask. He truly was a brilliant man.

“Well then, I shall tell my wife Hilde to keep Julianne company. She will be able to prepare Julianne for her future married life that way.” That had been a bit of a joke, but as I was Baron Dulac’s enemy, what he was doing was basically offering his family as hostages. He was either doing it because he trusted me, or because he wanted to be able to admonish his lord without having to think about his family’s safety.

“I will prepare a room for Julianne’s mother then.”

“Thank you. I entrust my wife and daughter to you.” He bowed in gratitude, even though I was essentially taking them captive.

Yon straightened his posture and seemed to think the discussion was over, but it in fact was not. There was one last thing I wanted him to do, and the prerequisite for that had just been met.

“However, you might feel a little lonely with all of your family in my territory.”

“Indeed. Having a drink at dinner while talking with my wife was one of my pleasures in life. It seems I am going to be lonely for a while.” He slapped his

forehead in jest and laughed.

I wondered if he had lowered his guard around me, or if he was just the kind of person to trust others easily. I appreciated that about him, but that wasn't ideal for nobles. It was because he was too trusting that it created vulnerabilities for villains like me to exploit.

"Then write letters."

"Excuse me?"

"Write instead of talking when you drink. Wouldn't that work too?"

Commoners couldn't send letters between territories, but it was possible for nobles. Or rather, they technically could, but because a postal service didn't exist in this world, their only method would be to pay a merchant or an adventurer who traveled a lot. Those were often attacked by bandits or monsters, though, so there was a high risk they would lose the letter. On the other hand, aristocrats could just have a soldier deliver it with a fast horse. Bandits didn't attack soldiers, and the horse was fast enough to flee from monsters. You could also trust the soldier to actually deliver the letter, and not just get paid and never accomplish the task.

Naturally, it had a cost—even more so if done regularly—but it shouldn't be a problem with all the money I was going to receive from the Welza Company.

"The idea never occurred to me."

"Even if she'll be with her daughter, my lands will still be unfamiliar to your wife. I'm sure that your letters would bring her comfort."

"Though we are not that far in terms of distance, it *is* a different territory, so I suppose such consideration is necessary. I would have never thought about it on my own, however. Thank you, Baron Girard."

"Also, you're family, so no need to hide anything. Feel free to inform each other about everything happening around you."

"...So that is your aim."

Yon realized that I was asking him to inform his wife of Baron Dulac's movements. Then she would talk about it with her daughter, and Julianne

would then convey it to me. Basically, I was asking him to indirectly betray Baron Dulac.

“Do you not have a secret or two that you do not want your family to know?” Yon questioned me.

“Naturally.”

“Well, I have some too. And I also have my pride as a knight.”

Tch, he’s too damn stubborn!

I wanted to tell him to be more flexible, but it was exactly because he was so earnest that I wanted him. I knew that things didn’t always work out as we desired, but I really needed to grasp Baron Dulac’s actions and couldn’t just give up. I considered using a spy, but I unfortunately didn’t have someone talented enough among my men. Gwynt could handle it with some training, but that would take time.

“However, Baron Girard...”

That stopped my train of thought in its tracks, and I looked at Yon. His expression was rather fretful, so I wondered what he was going to say.

“If it is something concerning the safety of my family, I may write about it in my letters.”

What a surprise! I was so shocked that I was certain that it showed on my face. After all, he had just said that when it came down to it, he’d choose being a father over being a knight. In short, while I wouldn’t receive regular reports about Baron Dulac, Yon would let me know if anything threatening my domain was brewing. Considering Yon had suggested the compromise himself, he would do it without fail.

“Family is important after all. If something happens, don’t hesitate to write about it. Julianne and your wife are going to become part of my family, so I would spare no effort to help you.” I knew he wasn’t the kind of man to readily rely on others, but I thought I could at least provide some lip service.

“I had been worried, but now I am glad that you were the one to become Julianne’s fiancé. Thank you very much.”

“I’m also glad that I got to create a strong bond with you thanks to this engagement. I should thank Baron Dulac for that.” The last part was obviously sarcasm—using Julianne to make Yon stay in my territory had backfired on him. Thanks to that, I would now be able to gain information about Baron Dulac. How careless of him.

“It is as you say, Baron Girard. I am grateful to my lord.”

We both laughed at that.

In my case, it wasn’t because I was happy or having fun. No, it was to show my intention to get back at that damn baron someday.

* * *

A few days after my discussions with Yon and the Welza Company, I summoned Adele and Julianne to my office.

“I heard you had a fight in the barracks’ training area,” I said, my legs crossed, as I conveyed my irritation by rhythmically tapping my index finger on my desk.

The two of them immediately started to make excuses.

“I saw her tormenting the soldiers with her twin swords! I was only helping them!”

“She is lying! I was training the soldiers and she suddenly attacked me with her short spear! Should you not reconsider your engagement with such a muscle-brained woman?!”

“What?! That’s because you were wounding our allies, you stupid mutt! Don’t you think you should resign from your instructor job before you end up killing Lord Jack’s precious soldiers?”

I felt like I heard something snap.

“I’m going to shut that mouth of yours!” they both shouted at the same time, and they started grappling.

A few seconds ago they had been looking at me with teary eyes, but now they were pulling at each other’s hair with furious expressions. At this rate, it wouldn’t take long before they started using their fists. If I let them fight in front of me, nobody would be able to stop them.

I needed to remind them who their master was.

I stopped tapping my finger on my desk and released my mana. “Quiet.”

They realized I’d gotten angry and turned toward me, no longer tugging on each other’s hair.

“I don’t mind you competing with each other. And I’ll permit you to quarrel if you think it’s for my sake. However...” I struck my palm on my desk. “I won’t tolerate you holding each other back like this.”

Competition was necessary for improvement. Yet there were also times where one might think that eliminating their opponent would net them an

effortless victory. In terms of sports, that would be sabotaging the other player or bribing the umpire. Of course, while it was fine to ignore rules when it came to war, letting them act like this on a regular basis would lead to a major internal rift. I needed them to compete fairly.

"Got it?"

They both nodded and finally let go of each other's hair, then shook hands, trying to demonstrate that they got along.

"I shall defeat more enemies than this stupid mutt in the next battle."

"There is no way that this scarred woman can do that. *I* shall be the one to defeat most of our foes, thanks to the Twin Hydra Blades I received from you, Master Jack."

Neither of them appreciated those comments, however, so they immediately glared at each other again.

"How pathetic. If you're going to rely on your weapons' performance, then you should relearn swordsmanship from scratch."

"Right back at you. What sort of fiancée is traipsing around on the battlefield? Why not just break off your engagement already?"

Their glares intensified as grips tightened to crushing force—I could see their veins pulsing on the backs of their hands. They truly wanted to get rid of each other. Did they even understand half of what I had said?

"You know, I don't plan to let go of either of you, even if you lose your contests with each other."

Not only Seravimia and Baron Dulac, but even Count Belmond—the liege-lord I should be counting on—was aiming for my territory. And I couldn't forget Lumié and Kevin, who had high chances of betraying me. With all that, I needed Adele and Julianne by my side. Naturally, I needed Gwynt too.

"Do not worry! I will always be your guard, Master Jack!" Adele smiled innocently, like a child.

"And I shall also do my best as your w-wife!" Julianne declared, a little embarrassed.

They don't get it at all. I put my hand on my forehead, feeling slightly dizzy. Their competitive spirits were so strong that they would just interpret anything I said so that it would be convenient for them. Perhaps I should try to talk to them separately next time.

As I was worrying about a rather difficult problem for a man who had been betrayed by his wife, someone knocked at the door.

Well, I guess it's perfect to change the mood.

"Enter."

The door slowly opened. Considering the time, I had expected to see Lumié with some black tea, but no, it was Gwynt.

"Excuse me." Perhaps it was because he was nervous, but his voice was higher-pitched than usual, so I couldn't help but think he had a woman's voice. "I finished my work and came to report..." He trailed off as he looked at Adele and Julianne, who were still engaged in their grip contest while glaring at each other.

I know how you feel, but don't worry about them.

"Don't mind them. Just talk."

"Yes!" He closed the door and walked to the center of the office, right in front of me.

"So, any strange movements from Ser Yon?"

As you might have guessed from that question, I had tasked Gwynt with monitoring Yon. While he had promised he would tell me if Baron Dulac planned to attack my domain, it could just have been a lie to make me trust him. It was possible that he would find some excuses to delay sending his wife to my demesne or even give me false information. I considered him a dutiful man, but I wasn't naive enough to just believe him like that. So I had Gwynt follow him in secret to ascertain the truth.

"He is preparing to fulfill his promise with you."

"What is he doing exactly?"

"He is making plans to have his wife moved to the Girard territory. I also

heard a rumor that he quarreled with Baron Dulac.”

So no sign of betrayal, huh? My fears had been unfounded.

“Do you know what the argument was about?”

“No, but considering that Ser Yon has been transferred to a new village in a remote area under the pretense of protecting it, I think he has incurred Baron Dulac’s displeasure.”

For a knight as strong as Yon to be sent to a newly founded village that could be destroyed by monsters at any moment—instead of an actually important town—the dispute must have been quite intense. Yon had likely protested the attack on the Girard territory rather strongly.

“That’s all the intel I needed. Good job,” I praised him, satisfied with the content of his report.

Julianne separated from Adele and stepped in front of me, her hands on my desk. “You placed my father under surveillance, Dear?”

She was questioning my vigilance toward Yon. It wasn’t bad to love one’s family so strongly, but other people shouldn’t be trusted so easily. If she wanted to become my wife, she would have to be more cautious.

“He’s attacked my demesne at Baron Dulac’s command. Of course I’m not going to trust him completely.”

Julianne shut her mouth, unable to object to my words. Adele was going to sneer at her, but I stopped her with a glare. This wasn’t the time to mess around.

“Am I wrong?”

“...No, you are not.” Julianne agreed, her expression looking like she was reflecting on herself for not having been able to think that far in advance. The fact that she didn’t get angry at me for doubting her family, and was instead trying her best to understand the way I thought, slightly improved my impression of her.

Still, while I didn’t think I had said too much, Julianne and Adele needed to be on an equal footing for their rivalry to produce good results. It wouldn’t do if

one of them was too superior to the other, so I had to balance things out.

"However, it seems I worried for nothing. Not only did he keep his word, he even protested to his lord. You have a wonderful father." I gently put my hand atop hers and moved my face closer. "As such, I also believe you—the woman who has inherited his blood. Will you continue to stay by my side from now on?"

Contrary to my words, I was already making preparations in case Julianne betrayed me, such as having her mother living here. Hilde wasn't only a hostage for Yon, but for Julianne too. It made me a little sad to be unable to trust even my fiancée, but as someone who failed to notice when someone was betraying me, I couldn't change my cautious personality. I needed some insurance.

"Naturally!" Her displeased expression completely vanished, and she smiled brightly.

Man, she's so gullible. I'm starting to worry that she might get tricked by another bad guy like me.

"Master Jack! I will also always be with you! I will listen to any order!" Adele, who couldn't restrain herself anymore, came next to Julianne and took my other hand. I was relieved to see that her loyalty was as high as usual. At this point, it wasn't an exaggeration to call her my right-hand woman, so I really wanted her to always stay by my side. And to that end, I didn't mind her suddenly grabbing my hand like she just did.

"Er, can I go back now?" Gwynt shyly asked. He was likely embarrassed, as from his point of view I was flirting with two women.

I could tell him that it was fine to go, but I needed him to diligently work for me from now on. *Guess I'll make some insurance for him too.*

"No, there's something I want to talk about. Come here."

"Yes!" He looked uneasy, wondering what I would tell him. It was soothing how pure and innocent he was compared to the two grabbing my hands.

As the front of my desk was now quite crowded, he went around it and stood next to me.

“How is your grandfather?”

“He is fine, but...”

“But what?”

“He wants to live in Fourth Village. I keep telling him that it’s too dangerous, but he won’t listen...”

I figured his grandfather wanted to spend the rest of his life in his late wife’s home village, but Gwynt was uneasy because of the recent monster raid. I could use that. It was even better than just giving him money.

“True, monsters are terrifying.”

“Exactly! I am just so scared that another raid could happen... Can you do something about it, Master Jack?!”

“...Well, if that’s your wish, Gwynt, then I shall grant it.” I pretended to think for a few seconds. “I’ll send a few soldiers to Fourth Village to protect it.” Dispatching soldiers cost money, so I didn’t like the idea, but it was worth it if it ensured Gwynt’s diligent service.

“Thank you very much!” Gwynt jumped for joy.

As I was feeling satisfied at acquiring yet another piece of insurance, a black mist suddenly appeared.

Shit! I wanted to escape, but Julianne and Adele were still holding my hands.

“Whoa!” Gwynt failed his landing and fell on me.

His feminine face and lips approached me. At this rate, we were going to kiss, but for some reason a part of me didn’t hate that, and I couldn’t move.

We’re gonna touch!

However, someone grabbed his head from behind just in time.

“Ouch! That hurts!” he yelled.

Julianne scowled at Gwynt as she lifted his head away from me.

“Bad boys need to be punished,” Adele said as she drew one of her twin swords. Her eyes were fixed on his crotch, so I immediately understood what

she was planning to cut.

Hey, that's going too far!

"Stop it, you two!" I shouted. Lumié, who had been on standby outside the room, entered at that exact moment. "Save Gwynt while I hold Adele back!" I cried to her.

"C-Certainly!" She didn't understand the situation, but she obeyed and ran up to Julianne. Meanwhile, I restrained Adele, ensuring Gwynt's safety.

I won't hold up long if I don't figure out that black mist's true nature soon.



Extra Story: Aiming to Be a Lord Appreciated by His People

It had been a few days since defeating the lesser earth dragon. With Kevin as guide and Adele as guard, I decided to inspect my domain and was now walking around the town at the center of the Girard territory, where my mansion was located.

The effects from the long years of misgovernment were still present; people were wearing dirty clothes and were scrawny with sunken cheeks from not eating enough. While I had lowered the taxes, it would need some time to show results, so the current situation should continue for a while.

* * *

“Nobody’s coming up to talk to me,” I commented as we were walking through the main street. When they saw me, people either took their distance or hid with their children inside their houses. Even after I’d protected Third Village, they were still as wary as usual. I figured it still wasn’t enough to overturn the bad impression they had of House Girard.

“Naturally. You are their lord, Master Jack. You are not in a position to be casually addressed,” Kevin said. He was right, but I wanted the people to like me more. To avoid the revolt bad ending flag, I hoped to be popular enough that they wouldn’t be frightened at the mere sight of me.

As I was thinking about what to do next...

“Help!” I heard a woman’s voice from a distance.

Adele’s dog ears perked up, and she turned in the direction the voice had come from.

“You know where she is?” I asked.

“This way.” She drew her crimson twin swords and silently began to run.

I was going to follow after her, but Kevin stopped me. “Do you intend to go too, Master Jack?”

From his expression, I guessed he didn't like that plan—this kind of thing wasn't the lord's job.

"Are you telling me I should ignore an incident happening in *my* territory?"

"No, but..."

"Then I'm going. As their liege, it's my job to protect the people."

I noticed that the passers-by who had been listening were looking at me with sparkling eyes. It hadn't been my intention, but I ended up doing the perfect thing to show them that I was a good lord. I needed to raise my close-to-zero popularity even more if I wanted them to trust me (and thus be able to easily exploit them).

Dealing with this incident should help.

"It is as you say, Baron Girard." Kevin had also noticed that we were the center of attention and bowed deeply, his speech more formal than usual. He likely thought it would be a bad influence on the people if his attitude was too defiant.

"As long as you get it. Anyway, let's go after Adele." I released my mana to strengthen my body and ran down the thin path between houses. Wooden boxes and drunkards were lying on the ground, so I jumped, but I ended up kicking a door that was suddenly opened.

"Here is money for the repairs." I turned back and saw Kevin tossing a silver coin to the elderly woman who had opened the door.

How thoughtful. And cool too. I should do the same next time.

"You liddle punk! Don'd ged in my way!" I heard a throaty, inarticulate voice. The source of the incident was likely a drunkard.

I turned to the left and arrived behind Adele. Next to her was a plebeian woman with a red, swollen cheek. A little ways away, a man was wielding an iron pipe. His head was craned upward, and he was drooling.

"You bazdard!" He didn't seem sane as he shouted toward the sky. It was as if he was fighting against an invisible enemy.

"Can someone really end up *like this* after drinking too much?" I couldn't help

but ask.

"No, I think this is due to the illegal drug that has recently begun to circulate inside the domain."

"Oh? There's someone who would dare do that?"

You little shit, obstructing me when I'm trying my best to restore my territory. I won't tolerate that. I'm gonna arrest you ASAP, and then I'll execute you in front of the people as an example.

I glared at Kevin for not having reported anything about this drug. "I hope you've already investigated it."

"Naturally," he answered nonchalantly, not caring about my anger.

I'm definitely gonna surprise you one of these days. Remember that.

"I want to know the details. Let's go back to the mansion for now."

"Understood."

Done with Kevin, I turned toward Adele. "Take this man and throw him into jail."

"What about the injured woman?"

I took a silver coin from my pocket and flipped it with my thumb. Adele caught it with one hand.

"That's for her medical expenses. Send her back home with it."

Commoners were the precious human resources working for me, so I needed her to quickly heal and start working again to make me more money.

* * *

Back at the mansion, Kevin explained the situation to me: one of the underlings of the Welza Company had been tempted by a corrupt merchant from another domain and started selling illegal drugs.

Thankfully, the culprit had been identified before it could become a big problem, and preparations for arresting him were underway. Kevin had planned to tell me everything once the preparations were complete, and we would have gone to seize him together.

It annoyed me that he had acted on his own behind the scenes, but his swiftness was praiseworthy. However, if he had moved the soldiers without telling me anything, I would have punished him.

Ten soldiers, Kevin, Adele, and I surrounded a general store in broad daylight. Ludwig was in charge of the back, and I the front.

Kevin stood next to me, holding the parchment with the charges written on it, and shouted, “We are here to arrest Brett for selling illegal drugs! If you shelter him, we shall crush this establishment along with him!” It was hard to believe that someone his age could muster such a strong and heavy voice.

Nothing happened, though. It seemed the culprit wasn’t going to instantly obey out of fear.

“What did the Welza Company say about how we deal with him?”

“I have their word that you can do as you please, Master Jack.”

Then that meant they didn’t let the guy escape. Or rather, if they didn’t want me to investigate too much, they should already have fired him.

“The dealer is a simple underling, right?”

“Yes, I am certain.”

Putting the fact that I didn’t understand his thoughts aside, Kevin always did his work perfectly. So if he said so, it was the truth.

I didn’t think that the people of this store decided to shelter the culprit on their own. Now that I had lowered the taxes, their business should have gotten better, so they had no reason to go against me just to protect a mere underling.

“Then something must have happened inside.” I drew my Twin Hydra Blades, and Adele and the soldiers did the same with their own weapons.

With all the soldiers, we were drawing quite a lot of attention, and passers-by had started to gather, so we had to quickly deal with the problem before it could cause an uproar.

“Charge—what?!” As I was giving the signal to go in, a bloodied man staggered out of the building. In one hand he held an axe, and in the other, he

was dragging the corpse of a man who had his head smashed. He was drooling, and his eyes were out of focus just like the junkie I had met before. “Is that Brett?”

“No, that is the shop manager’s son.”

So even the shop manager’s son was a junkie? No, wait. There would be no point in getting money if he wasn’t sane enough to use it. As the son of a merchant, he should be able to understand that much. Meaning that he hadn’t taken the drug willingly.

“Master Jack... Look...” Adele, who was standing in front of me to protect me, pointed at the store’s entrance with one of her swords.

Three more junkies exited the building: two men and a woman, who were holding either a sword or a knife. From their clothes, I figured they must be clerks working there.

“Ah... Aaaah...” they groaned, slowly walking our way.

“Can they recover?” I asked Kevin, who should have investigated enough to know the answer, and he replied by shaking his head. As I expected, once you took too much and got addicted to it, it was too late. “What happens when the effects of the drug disappear?”

“They become living corpses.”

I couldn’t help but feel deep hatred for this drug that took away the precious human resources working for me. I couldn’t wait to execute Brett and the corrupt merchant who had instigated him.

“If you throw your weapons away, I’ll at least let you live!” I declared. However, the junkies weren’t sane enough to understand and started to attack the soldiers.

And yet, the soldiers didn’t retaliate. Perhaps they were acquainted with the drug addicts and couldn’t bring themselves to harm them. Instead, the soldiers were looking at me, pleading with their eyes to save the junkies.

“...Adele, subdue them.”

“Certainly!”

Being the strongest character, Adele should be able to restrain them without harming them. I entrusted her with this place and entered the store to search for the culprit.

The inside was dim with no illumination. Just when I thought that I wanted some light, Kevin, who had followed behind me, turned on a lantern.

“You’re well-prepared.”

“I am glad to be of use to you, Master Jack.”

As if I would be happy to hear you say that with such a listless voice. If you’re going to flatter me, try to act like it.

“Stay away!” a voice shouted. Thanks to the light, I found a man, crying, holding a knife in his hands. A few cups rolled by his feet. I noticed that there were dregs of a violet liquid and figured that it must have been the drug—taken orally, apparently.

“This is Brett,” Kevin said.

“So you’re the scoundrel who’s troubling my territory. I hope you’re ready for your punishment.” I lightly waved one of my Twin Hydra Blades and walked toward him.

Brett tried to step back, but his back was against a wall. He couldn’t escape.

“Wait! I’ll give you all the money I earned from selling the drug! So please, don’t kill me!”

“Don’t worry, I’ll take your money after I execute you.”

“I beg you! You’re the lord, no? Then listen to my request!”

“Hell no. You’ve only got one choice—whether you want to die here, or get executed in front of everyone else.” I sneered at him, and his face paled in despair.

Realizing he was fated to die, he yelled out in desperation and charged at me with his knife. I repelled it with my right sword and stabbed his unguarded abdomen with my left blade.

Brett vomited blood and shot me one last resentful glance before collapsing.

“Impressive.” Kevin praised me, clapping his hands. “What do we do now?”

“We take out the body.”

“Understood.” We exited the store with Kevin carrying Brett’s corpse.

Outside, the junkies had been safely restrained and were now bound with ropes. Also, more people had gathered around the store to see what was happening. There were now dozens of them.

“I, Jack Girard, dealt with the illegal drug dealer! I hope you all listen and take it to heart: I won’t forgive anyone who threatens my demesne!” I glanced at Kevin. He nodded and held up Brett’s corpse by the head. “If you don’t want to end up like him, then live a right and honest life! As long as you do so, I’ll protect you!”

The first one to applaud was Adele, followed by the soldiers. Then finally, the people who had been watching us started to clap too. I could hear some call me a lord intolerant of injustice, which confirmed that my performance had achieved the desired effect.

It might have only been a small incident, but that was the first step. Solving many little issues like that would improve my image—and *that* would break the bad ending flag of revolt.

Afterword

Hello, I'm Wanta. Thanks to everyone's support, volume 2 has successfully made it to print, and for that, you have my heartfelt gratitude.

Incidentally, this series is also being translated into English in the West (ebook only). Moreover, a manga is in the works, so as the author, I can't help but look forward to it.

Back to the subject of this volume, you should now have a general picture of the incident that started in volume 1. If everything goes as planned, that incident should reach its conclusion in the next volume. I want to write about the confrontation against a certain baron, so I hope it will be released.

However, no matter how much I think about the story, it won't be able to continue if it doesn't sell. So if you enjoyed this book, it would really help if you spread the word on social media! Don't hesitate to leave reviews too!

Finally, I want to offer my thanks to:

Mr. Yunagi, the illustrator, for his beautiful illustrations. Each time I see a new piece of artwork from him, I'm filled with happiness. Julianne looks like a prince popular with the ladies, and Gwynt has a design that perfectly brings out his charm as an *otokonoko*.

To Mr. K, the editor, who helped greatly to correct and improve the script this time too. I'm truly thankful for all the comments you gave me.

Finally, to you, the person reading this right now. Without everyone's help, volume 2 would never have been released. Thank you very much.

Well then, I pray for us to have the chance to meet again in the next afterword.