
Wanta
Illustrator: Yunagi
3
Survival Strategies of a Corrupt Aristocrat


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She sure sounds happy.
Adele
"At this rate, I will be hugging you forever, Master Jack."


Seravimia
"It's all your fault, Baron Girard!"
"So we're fighting in the end..."
Jack

Survival Strategies of a Corrupt Aristocrat

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Prologue: The Only One Who Can Understand Me

Although I'd been born with a weak body and spent most of my time in my room, my past life before becoming Seravimia had ended up being longer than everyone had expected. It hadn't been fun, though: My body always hurt because of my chronic illness, and most of my days were spent on round trips between my home and the hospital. I did have some acquaintances on the net, but we only talked once every few months, so I wouldn't really call them friends. Not only had we never gone out somewhere together, we'd never even met in real life.

Anyway, because of this, when I died, I thought I would finally be free, but instead I woke up once again. At first, I despaired at the thought of having to live another harsh life, but that attitude changed completely when I saw my reflection in the window.

That was because the girl reflected in the glass looked like a popular idol.

I touched my hair and enjoyed its silky smooth feeling. I'd lost my hair around half a year before my death because of the chemotherapy I had to go through for my treatment, so I couldn't stop myself from crying, overcome by emotion.

"I've become Seravimia."

There was no way I would mistake the appearance of the girl I had spent dozens of hours designing. And thanks to that, I immediately understood I had come to the world I had created—the world of *Survival Strategies of a Corrupt Aristocrat*.

I had made the game to escape from my suffering, and now I had reincarnated as a character from it...or maybe that wasn't the right term, considering my soul had just entered a soulless husk. Maybe it was more right to call it possession? Either way, that wasn't

important. What *was* important was that I went from a weak, withering body eaten by illness to a wonderful one, with beautiful skin that was smooth and pale like porcelain, slender but powerful muscles, and an overwhelming amount of mana that simmered like magma inside me.

Not only could I now run without getting out of breath, I could even reach the second floor of a building with a mere jump. While surprised by how light my body felt, I thought about the fun days that were awaiting me in this world.

Unfortunately, my expectations quickly turned to disappointment.

Every character I met acted just like how I had designed their personality, replying exactly how I expected them to, and so I couldn't bring myself to consider them actual people. It was because I had created them myself that I felt so disgusted. I could only see them as puppets doing as their programs instructed, and my initial exaltation vanished.

However, it was thanks to that that I quickly noticed Baron Girard, who acted differently than I expected and did whatever he wanted. When I realized that he was just like me, someone possessed by a soul from another world, my entire body trembled from the excitement I felt. I was certain that if I were with him, I would be able to enjoy this world. And for that, I needed to make him mine—no matter what.

* * *

I was on my way back from meeting with the king, where I'd told him to stop meddling with Baron Girard behind the scenes, walking down the main street of the capital together with the elf sisters of the Verdant Wind. The street was filled with people and full of life—but none of them had a soul.

"Say, Lady Seravimia. Why are you helping Baron Girard?" asked Lily, the little sister, with a perplexed expression.

In order to show them how important Baron Girard was to me, I had brought the Verdant Wind sisters to my meeting with the king. That meant they had also seen me threatening him with my sword,

so of course she would wonder why I would go so far for Baron Girard.

"You're curious too, Olivia?" I asked the older sister.

"Well, just a little," she replied. Her words made it look like she didn't particularly care, but it was obvious that she was actually very interested from the way she was staring at me to hear more.

I could tell them why Baron Girard was so special to me, but they would never understand. There was no way they could. So I decided to answer vaguely without telling the true reason. "Let's just say that I'm interested in him."

"What?!" Lily exclaimed. "Do you like his face or something?"

"Not at all."

"Then why are you interested in him?!"

"Because he's the only one who can understand me."

"What does that mean? Can you explain?"

"Nope. You need to think about it yourself."

"Hmm..." Lily put her hand against her chin and started to ponder.

I knew, however, that she would quickly give up—I'd created dumb characters that weren't able to think about complex things. No matter what, she would never try to get smarter. I'd even tried to give her books, but she never read a single line. I'd also thought that maybe making her stronger would make her change, so I had her fight against monsters to increase her mana and taught her advanced spells, but her core personality—the very nature of who she was—never changed.

As for the people walking in the street, while I hadn't made a detailed setting for them like the elf sisters and other named characters, I *had* made a general outline for the population. Mob characters followed that outline as they lived, so they weren't that different from the rest—moving dolls.

I really want to see Baron Girard again as soon as possible.

"I still don't get it, but I do understand that he's important to you. Are you closer to him than to us?" Lily asked.

"No, but I want to get closer to him," I replied.

However, despite my wish, I had a big flaw: Because of my shut-

in life, I didn't know how to make friends. Just how could I get closer to Baron Girard?

Our meeting had gone rather well, in my opinion. I had slowly cornered him during our conversation, then acted as though I truly wanted to kill him, which must have left a deep impression on him. Moreover, I had talked about my perfect world to draw his interest and withdrew without making a fuss to preserve his dignity, so he should think highly of me as a mysterious and tactful woman.

Thinking about it, it didn't just go "rather well"—it went perfectly. Yep, I'm sure of it. But... I don't know what to do after that. Just how do I get closer to him? I need to know.

"Say, how do you think I could get closer to Baron Girard?" I asked Lily the chatterbox. She might only be acting as I had designed her, but her knowledge should still be useful, and it was better to ask someone than try to search for an answer I couldn't find on my own.

"Personally, I think it's better to not be too polite. It's easier to feel close to someone when you speak to them less formally!" Lily suggested.

I see. Didn't expect such decent advice from Lily.

I didn't want him to hate me, so I'd been pretty polite during our meeting, but I should be less formal if I wanted to get closer to him. I could try being more casual next time, since it wouldn't be our first encounter.

"You can also try depending on him! You know how weak men are to requests from women!" she added.

"Really?"

"Yep! If you ask cutely, he should agree to just about anything!"

"That only works for women who behave innocently," interjected Olivia. "I don't think it'd work for Lady Seravimia, considering how she usually acts."

I hadn't been sure about the advice, so I was thankful for Olivia's intervention. Indeed, I was different from Lily, so I didn't think asking for something cutely would work for me.

Yeah, I shouldn't do that. It would be too unlike me.

"Ah, yeah, you're right. If Lady Seravimia tried to ask for

something, it would sound like an order," Lily agreed.

"You need to be careful. If you give advice that doesn't suit the person, it might have the opposite effect," Olivia warned her sister, who pursed her lips, sulking.

"Then what should she do? She can give a crazy oppressive feeling when she stays quiet, and her heart is a little ug—"

"Lily?!" Olivia quickly covered her sister's mouth in panic.

I didn't hear the last bit, so I wondered what the issue was. "What were you saying about my heart?"

"That you have a heart of gold, so I'm sure he will notice your good points if he spends time with you!" Olivia said instead of her sister.

"Really?"

"Yes! Don't you think so too, Lily?"

Lily nodded repeatedly, her mouth still sealed.

Well, if the two sisters with distinct personalities thought I was fine as I was, then I supposed there shouldn't be a problem if I acted true to myself with Baron Girard. Now I wanted to see him even more. But I had to endure the urge. I was the hero, so anything I did would cause him trouble. If I wanted to meet him, I needed to do it in a way that nobody would notice.

I'm in a really constrained position...

"You sure it's fine to say something like that, Sis?"

"If I didn't, it would have ended badly..."

"Well, that's true, but..."

"Don't worry. Baron Girard will do something about it."

"You're right! Lady Seravimia likes him so much, so I'm sure he'll accept her!"

The elf sisters whispered to each other, so I didn't hear everything, but it seemed they were talking about Baron Girard. I didn't like it. It wasn't as though I wanted to monopolize him, just that I didn't like them leaving me out of the conversation.

"Stop the chitchat," I said, clapping my hands to get their attention. I didn't even think when I did it—my body had just moved on its own.

The sisters' pointed ears—characteristic of the elves—twitched,

and they stopped their discussion to turn my way.

I need to say something... I pondered frantically and somehow managed to think of something. "Baron Girard should ask for my help soon enough. Unfortunately, I can't act directly considering my position, so I'll have to send you two instead."

"A rural baron is going to make a direct request to you, the hero?" Olivia asked. She seemed to think it was too impertinent for a mere baron to ask something of me, given my status close to royalty.

She really didn't get it. Baron Girard was so important that I wouldn't mind having to turn the kingdom into my enemy.

"Of course. The two of us share a special bond, after all," I vaguely answered with a wink.

"How romantic!" Lily exclaimed with sparkling eyes, and her words went straight to my heart.

I see. I only ever thought about him as the only person who could understand me, but our relationship could actually turn romantic. Then I should tell him all the things he wants to know to draw his interest. I may be bad at making requests, but I'm good at doing things for people. If I show him how I can be a very devoted woman, he might start to like me.

I tried imagining how life would be if I lived with Baron Girard.

I'd be so happy. And I'd finally be able to get what I'd always wanted in my past life—a normal family.

I really looked forward to the future.



Chapter 1: Maintaining the Public Order in the Territory

I'd taken down the Welza Company, which had been damaging the Girard territory behind my back, and had most of their executives put to death. Thanks to that, I'd taken care of the traitors in my domain, but that also meant losing the only merchant company in my land.

The distribution of goods was somewhat stalled, and the prices were gradually increasing. At this rate, daily necessities might become scarce. We were somehow managing thanks to the traveling merchants' effort, but a slight change could quickly aggravate the situation.

That alone was enough to give me a headache, but unfortunately, there was another big problem—Baron Dulac, the one who had manipulated the Welza Company, was aiming for the Girard territory.

Unlike peaceful Japan, theft and murder was the norm in this world. Baron Dulac wasn't going to stop just because I'd won this round. And because his honor was at stake too, I couldn't expect a rational decision from him—he would keep attacking until my death.

It was quite possible that he would try sending his army next time. I might have had Adele—the strongest character in the game—and Julianne—who had plenty of combat experience—on my side, but considering the size of our respective domains, Baron Dulac had a far greater military force. And there were likely several strong warriors among them.

Therefore, if I wanted to make my victory absolute, I either needed to get more soldiers or obtain power that would trump an entire army—

"May I come in?" came a voice from outside my office, interrupting my thoughts. It was Ludwig. As the captain of my

soldiers, he should be training with his men, so what was he doing at my office door? He wouldn't come just to see my face, so...had a new problem arisen?

"You may," I said.

Ludwig entered, vigorously flinging open the door. His face was covered with fresh wounds and bruises, proving he had been training fervently. His expression was also changing, and he was starting to give the presence of a true warrior.

I guess he's growing well.

"What's your business?" I asked.

Ludwig saluted, one hand on his chest, before stepping forward and slamming his hands on my desk as he leaned toward me.

"Please recruit more soldiers!" he shouted, spraying saliva, which made me furrow my brow.

"Why?" My tone was curt and harsh to show my displeasure, but Ludwig didn't notice. He was so oblivious it was almost worth praising.

"We're not enough!"

What? I hadn't reduced the army's head count, and yet they were shorthanded? I'd thought about adding to my manpower to fight against Baron Dulac, so I wasn't against recruiting more soldiers. I did have some budget for it after all, even if not much. If Ludwig gave me a good enough reason, I wouldn't mind approving.

"Explain," I ordered.

"We'll need at least ten soldiers to protect Fourth Village. However, with fewer of us, we'll be obligated to reduce the frequency at which we patrol the domain."

Ah, yeah, I promised to protect Gwynt's grandfather and send soldiers to defend Fourth Village. But Adele and Julianne caused that commotion right afterward so I completely forgot about it...

It wasn't my intention, but I'd almost broken my promise. If I didn't hold to my vow to protect his family, Gwynt might betray me, and it could lead to a bad ending. This was a matter of high priority.

"What is the problem with reducing your patrolling frequency?" I asked.

"We won't be able to understand what is happening in the

different villages. And if we monitor them less, they may do something unlawful again. Also, we would be too late to notice assaults from monsters and bandits. The territory has finally become a better place—I don't want it to worsen just because we're cutting corners."

Ludwig was still sputtering saliva my way, which was annoying, but what he said was sound. This world didn't have a magic item that could work like a phone, so transmitting information took time. Having the soldiers patrol wasn't only important to maintain public order, but also to be aware of the condition of my fief.

"We're not enough, so could you recruit more soldiers, please?!" Ludwig asked once again.

"I was actually considering adding to our troops, but you do understand that it'll take time, right?"

"Of course."

"Then you'll need to make do with your current numbers. We'll send around ten soldiers to Fourth Village and the rest will continue with their current duties. You should be able to manage patrolling the domain with about twenty men, no?"

The Girard territory wasn't that big. In fact, the round trip to a village by horse could be done in a day. It'd be hard on them, but there should be enough soldiers to patrol the three other villages at the same time.

"But we're also checking for crimes committed within the domain and supervising the prison, so we're not enough..." Ludwig said. True enough, patrolling wasn't their only job. "Moreover, we're currently being trained by Lady Julianne and Miss Adele, so we barely have any spare time. There is a limit to how many of our days off and breaks we can give up to keep going on."

I had informed my men that the Welza Company had been responsible for the monster assaults, so it was no surprise they would feel the urgency of the situation and train more. If Ludwig, their captain, had deemed it necessary, then I didn't want to command them to stop.

Now that I knew how shorthanded we were, I couldn't take my time anymore and had to act immediately. "I understand the

situation. I shall recruit some soldiers even if it means throwing money away. However, large-scale recruitment is impossible, so I think you'll only get around ten new men."

"Thank you very much! Ten more is already plenty!" Ludwig rejoiced, taking my hands in his.

Acting so familiarly with your lord was pretty risky. Thankfully, it was fine since we were alone in the room, but if anyone else had been there, it could have made me lose face as a noble. It could start a rumor that my vassals made light of me, which might make other aristocrats and the people of my demesne look down on me. If I didn't want such a future to happen, he needed to be reeducated.

"Lay off," I commanded.

"Ah, excuse me!" He immediately let go.

"Also, name a vice captain among the soldiers you'll send to Fourth Village."

"How should we handle the selection?"

"I'll take a look at the ones you recommend." I didn't know the ability of the men in my army, so I decided to leave the selection to Ludwig. What I'd do, however, was look at their character. They would receive the important role of vice captain while being posted away from the mansion, so I had to choose carefully. I was especially scared of a coup d'état happening, so the most important quality for a vice captain wasn't their skill with a sword, but how loyal to me they were.

"Understood! I'll immediately go search for candidates! I look forward to the increase in soldiers!" Ludwig said, his tone so light and familiar you wouldn't believe he was talking to his liege. He then trotted outside the office... Yeah, he really needed to be taught manners.

Lumié peeked inside the room from the opened door. She must have come to see what the noise had been. Perfect timing.

"I want to talk about Ludwig," I said, beckoning her inside.

Lumié entered, closed the door silently, then stood before me. "Did he commit an error?"

Oh? It was pretty rare for her to be so nervous. She must be very anxious that her brother had done something bad. It was possible

that Lumié would betray me in the future, so I had to be careful with my words. *I should talk about something else before breaching the topic of Ludwig's manners.*

"Don't worry, I just want to talk about his future. You don't need to be so tense." She relaxed. "The Girard territory is going to increase its troops from now on. We'll start with a small group of about ten at first, but as our tax income stabilizes, we'll recruit more."

"Are you worried about an invasion from another house?" Lumié asked. Being a maid, she had only the bare minimum of information, and yet she had managed to deduce the answer from that. She was very clever and perceptive. I wish she could share some of her intelligence with her brother.

I nodded silently, then continued. "The role of captain will greatly change over time. Currently, he can watch over every soldier individually, but as we grow in scale, he'll only talk with unit leaders. He won't be able to do as he's done until now."

As my army increased to hundreds, it wouldn't be possible to manage people individually. So Ludwig would need the ability to communicate with the leader of each unit to know about the soldiers and effectively command them. It was a different set of skills than what he currently used, so I had to make him change the way he thought before it was too late.

"He'll face many obstacles and struggle with the management of the troops. However, he won't tell me anything."

"Yes, he tends to shoulder everything alone when it comes to his own problems..." Lumié noted, sounding like a mother. She truly loved Ludwig. And that was why I had to think of them as a pair.

In *Survival Strategies of a Corrupt Aristocrat*, Ludwig was only a mere soldier and died early in the game, so I never got to notice Lumié's feelings. But *now* I knew about her brother—that her loyalty depended on his survival and how he was treated. As long as Ludwig was happy, Lumié would never betray me. I was certain of that.

"As someone with many subordinates, he'll need to have better manners toward nobles. Can I ask you to educate him on etiquette so that he interacts with me properly?" I finally reached the main

topic. The way I had phrased it made it sound like I was asking to do it for Ludwig's sake, which should make her more enthusiastic about it.

"Of course. I may have pampered him a bit too much until now. I shall make him a man worthy of serving you, Master Jack," Lumié declared, the determination clear in her voice. He might be her brother, but I didn't think she would take it easy on him, so that should settle the matter with Ludwig.

"I'm counting on you." The conversation over, I went back to my work, taking up my quill pen, but I sensed Lumié staring at me and looked up again. "Is there a problem?"

"No..." She opened and closed her mouth a few times. It was rare for her to be so hesitant.

"Come on, we're not strangers. If there's something on your mind, then don't hold back."

"...I thought I was not useful to you anymore, Master Jack, so I am glad to have been given a new task," Lumié said, flushing. She clutched her skirt tightly and looked down, avoiding my eyes.

Her reaction was so endearing that I couldn't help but find her adorable. A strong desire to make her mine welled up inside me—likely Jack's body acting up again. I really hoped his remnant inside me would just disappear already.

"What are you saying? I rely on you, Lumié—and I always will."

"Thank you very much. I shall continue to serve you wholeheartedly, Master Jack."

Lumié's kind and tender smile captivated me. It was the first time I ever saw her make such an expression since I'd taken possession of Jack's body. I was usually very prone to suspicion, but just this once, I felt that her words truly came from the heart.



* * *

Salary is thirty silver coins. Food, shelter, and clothing are provided for free.

Intense training is required and there is a risk of death, but your duty will allow you to protect your beloved homeland.

In the event of your death, condolence money will be issued to your family.

More than a hundred people responded to this recruitment ad, which was far more than I had expected. Well, of course they would—the conditions were really good, after all.

The main work in my domain was farming, but only the eldest son could inherit the family farm. Because of that, all the men born later were only used as tenant farmers. If they didn't like that, all they could do was search for another job. Unfortunately, my fief was poor, and it was difficult to find a new occupation. So it was only natural that so many men would be attracted to my offer.

For an instant, I had been hopeful that a famous character could have been among them, but their physical and technical tests showed they were all ordinary people. Oh well, such was life. And even if they weren't good enough now, they would get better with training.

I had Adele and Julianne—who would be their instructors—make the selection, and we ended up with around twenty new soldiers. Hopefully, it wouldn't take too long for them to be useful in battle.

While I was concerned about Baron Dulac, time went on, and two months passed. The new recruits' training had advanced, and they had become somewhat usable. Curious about their progress, I decided to watch over their practice for the first time in a while.

All my soldiers—old and new—were lined up in the training ground in front of the barracks with Ludwig standing at their head. I observed them from a cushioned chair with my arms on the armrests. Lumié was behind me, protecting me from the harsh

sunlight with a parasol. Next to her was a cart with a pot of black tea and a cup, proving once again how great of a maid she was. On my left and right were Adele and Julianne in full gear, their expressions those of stern drill instructors. The average noble would wince at how much fighting spirit and bloodlust they were radiating.

It must be pretty exhausting for the soldiers if they're like this everyday.

"Baron Girard is observing us today, but training will proceed as usual! Move your body like your lives depend on it!" Ludwig shouted. I could feel he had become more reliable as a captain.

"He's grown into a fine man," I muttered loud enough for Lumié to hear me. I couldn't see her, but I was certain she was happy I had praised her precious brother.

When the soldiers finished splitting into two groups, Adele and Julianne spoke.

"I shall prove my strength to you, Master Jack."

"Please watch my performance, Dear!"

Did they forget that the primary objective here is to train the soldiers?

Adele went to the left group and Julianne to the right. They glared at each other until the very last moment, but I ignored it for now.

"Serve me some black tea." I decided to drink something to refresh my mood.

"Understood," replied an unfamiliar girl, pushing the silver cart next to me. She was around twelve and had brown, shoulder-length hair. She had the kind of rustic look you could often find in the Girard territory, so I didn't even need to ask to know she was a local hire.

"An apprentice maid, huh? Newly employed?" I asked Lumié.

"Things were beginning to be too much for me to manage alone. Sir Kevin was the one who selected her," she answered.

I had entrusted Kevin with appointing new staff as long as it stayed within budget. I would rather check the candidates myself to appraise their character, but Kevin had refused, saying it wouldn't be appropriate for the lord himself to be involved even in minor staff

recruitment.

"It's been getting rather busy recently, so it's good to have more personnel," I said, watching the maid-in-training. The hand holding the teapot was shaking, showing how nervous she was. She likely couldn't relax near her lord. "Are you getting used to your work?" I asked, hoping that would ease her mind, but it had the opposite effect. Her entire body twitched, making her arm move and spill tea on the silver cart.

"A-Aaah..." She burst into tears. It wasn't as though she had soiled my clothes, so she shouldn't be so scared. "I'm going to be killed... Mom... Dad... I'm sorry!"

Wait, what?! I'm not some homicidal maniac, I'm not gonna kill you for a small mistake like this! Just what the hell was she told? I glanced at Lumié behind me.

"I thought a certain amount of tension was needed to prevent her from slacking on her work," she explained.

"You went too far. Also, you shouldn't lie."

Lumié was lenient with her brother, but she seemed pretty strict with her subordinates. I didn't expect her to tell the girl she should risk her life on the job. A little fear could be motivating, but she went a bit too far this time.

I didn't want my lifestyle to be disturbed, so I gently spoke to the crying apprentice maid. "I don't mind such a small mistake. Just serve my tea already."

"Huh? You are willing to forgive me...?" She looked at me, surprised, her eyes brimming with tears. Even speaking softly hadn't assuaged her fear. I supposed nothing I would say could reassure her.

"I won't repeat myself. Get on with it."

"Y-Yes!" Her eyes still full of tears, she quickly poured my tea and went behind me.

I took the cup and sipped the black tea. "The taste isn't bad. Good job for a simple apprentice." To be honest, I didn't really understand the flavor of tea, but it wasn't bad, so I praised her.

I placed the cup back on its saucer and looked toward the field again. The training had already begun.

Several soldiers charged at Adele and Julianne. Based on how stiff their movements were, they were likely new recruits. Adele and Julianne didn't even move from their spots as they struck with their wooden swords and knocked them out.

Errr... They're not moving anymore...

Another group of new recruits stepped forward only to meet the same fate. This process repeated itself several times, to the point where I wondered if it could really be called training.

Just as I was starting to wonder if the fallen soldiers had actually died, the first group to have been knocked down staggered back to their feet.

Thank God they're alive.

"Is being beaten up making them stronger?" I asked.

"I heard they were doing this to accustom them to pain," Lumié answered.

I guess the training isn't to make them stronger physically, but mentally so that they're able to stand on the battlefield. Getting repeatedly knocked down by those two would erase their fear of goblins and such. It should also build their grit to the point they wouldn't falter even if struck by a club.

"So they're laying the foundation to make them stand on the battlefield. Makes sense. Have Julianne and Adele been well received? Have you heard anything?"

"Since both of them are beautiful women, the soldiers are more motivated to train with them than with Sir Kevin. In fact, it seems they even have fan clubs."

I clicked my tongue. Change was occurring faster than I had expected. "Fan clubs" sounded nice, but in other words, they were basically factions. The members would sympathize with Adele's and Julianne's ideas, and some might even be willing to risk their lives for them. The main issue was, of course, Julianne. It was highly probable that she would become my wife in the future, so having her own soldiers meant that I wouldn't be able to ignore her opinion. Or she could even threaten me using force.

"They're *that* well-liked?" I asked.

"Does that bother you?" Lumié teased me. Unfortunately for her,

I currently didn't care about them romantically. What I wanted to know was how far the formation of factions had progressed.

"I just want to know the situation in my army," I replied.

"If you say so." Lumié showed me an understanding smile, thinking I was acting like a jealous fiancé. It seemed like it would be a pain to clear up the misunderstanding, so I ignored it. "According to what I have heard from Ludwig, their rivalry is evenly matched. The three of them are different types, so it seems opinions tend to be divided."

"Wait... The three of them? Adele, Julianne, and who?"

"Gwynt."

"...Ah, yeah, makes sense." I had Gwynt select men that he thought had talent for scouting and spying to train them. I didn't count them in the numbers of my private army—they were a special unit. Still, was it wrong of me to think that this all felt like a gamelike mechanic for the companions I had personally recruited to be creating their own factions? "I got the gist of it. Tell your brother to make sure that order is kept."

Gwynt aside, I would have to execute any soldier who tried to lay their hands on Adele or Julianne. I didn't want to lose soldiers when I already had so few, so I had to make sure they respected the rules.

"Understood. I shall strictly order Ludwig to watch that no one does anything untoward."

"I'm counting on you."

The conversation now over, I went back to observing the training. Apparently, what followed being beaten up was running and doing practice swings in full gear. They also trained to climb walls and ladders in preparation for the day they would need to siege a castle or a fortress. I was relieved to see they weren't just building up their spirits, but also doing proper training.

Good. Now they just need actual experience on the field and they'll finally be proper soldiers.

"Call Ludwig," I ordered. The apprentice maid heard me and ran to the training ground. Her skirt fluttered about as she did so, which wasn't good manners, but it was Lumié's job to warn her about it,

not mine.

A few moments later, Ludwig, drenched in sweat, arrived before me and knelt. "Did you need me for something?"

"I have work for the soldiers."

Lumié took out two parchments and gave them to Ludwig. They were requests from First Village, which was an important location, being the only village with a highway leading to other domains—notably, a bridge connecting to the Dulac barony.

Two groups of bandits—one that had recently started to appear on the main road, and another that had settled down on a mountain near the village—were stealing the village's vegetables and livestock. Based on the damage reported, each group appeared to number around a dozen. They weren't a large threat, so even inexperienced soldiers should be fine if Adele and Julianne accompanied them.

I couldn't just leave the bandits alone because it was a pain to deal with them. It might lead to casualties, and it could discourage traveling merchants from coming to my fief, so the issue needed to be resolved quickly. Usually, I would just ask adventurers for that kind of thing, but it was a great opportunity for my army to gain real combat experience.

"The job is to fight the bandits hiding in the main road and the mountain...isn't it?" Ludwig asked, a bit hesitant. The reason was simple: While the soldiers were used to fighting monsters, they weren't used to killing people.

"Exactly. You can do it, right?"

"Of course. This is why we are training," he firmly replied. The harsh training had built his confidence. I could expect him to do his job perfectly.

"Well then, here is the outline of the plan," I said. Ludwig swallowed, nervously waiting for me to continue. "Today, Gwynt and his subordinates will go scout the brigands' hideouts. The rest of you will depart two days later. Once you've arrived at First Village, one group will go to the mountain with Adele, and the other to the highway with Julianne."

Considering the inexperienced new recruits, I decided to have two of my trump cards go with them. That way, it should be

impossible for them to lose.

"Understood. Can I assume that I am to give directions from First Village?" Ludwig asked.

"Exactly. I'll come too, so work hard."

"Yes, sir!" Ludwig saluted, a hand on his chest. He seemed proud, likely fired up at the thought of protecting the territory.

"Also, no training tomorrow. I'll give a small allowance of two silver coins to everyone, so enjoy yourselves."

"Thank you very much! They will be delighted!"

"Don't expect it to happen every time."

"Of course, sir!" Ludwig happily said and left.

That added to my expenses, but it was necessary to boost their morale. It was by making them think that working for me earned them more money than other jobs that I would have them put their lives on the line.

"You have changed," said a gentle voice in a sisterly tone from behind me. "You have matured to the point you are now able to share with others."

If it weren't Lumié speaking, I would have scolded her.

"I don't need your superfluous comments."

"Are you embarrassed, Master Jack?"

"As if. Keep your jokes to yourself or the apprentice maid is gonna get the wrong idea." I didn't like being made fun of so one-sidedly, so I stood up and caressed her ass.

I had expected to surprise her, but she only smiled in response. "You have a fiancée now, so you should tone down your mischief."

I clicked my tongue and left the training ground. Lumié had won this round.

By the way, I wasn't fleeing from Adele and Julianne who were staring at me from afar—definitely not!

* * *

Two days later, we arrived at First Village together with fifteen soldiers to deal with the bandits. The men pitched a big tent suitable for someone of my status, and everything necessary for me to do

my governing work was prepared. I could feel Kevin's intention to make me work without rest. Surprisingly, being the lord of a domain wasn't that different from working for an exploitative company. That aside, Lumié and the apprentice maid I had met last time also came with us to take care of me, so I should be able to live comfortably.

I let Ludwig take command, went into the tent, and checked the finances of my territory. Thanks to the funds I had seized from the Welza Company, we had finally managed to get some spare money. That made me want to splurge on luxuries, but I restrained myself. I needed to invest in the Girard territory and establish a system that would produce more wealth first.

My luxurious lifestyle feels so far away...

I was starting to feel depressed and was going to take a look at another document when I heard a voice.

"I have something to report. May I have a little of your time?" said Ludwig. He must have come to report what they had decided during their strategy meeting.

"You may."

Ludwig entered the tent and stopped before me, saluting with his hand on his chest. "We have established a plan from the information we received from Gwynt."

"Explain."

"We have discovered the location of the bandits' mountain base, so Miss Adele shall lead a squad of soldiers to attack them directly. As for the other group of bandits, it appears they do not have a base, so Lady Julianne shall disguise herself as a merchant to bait them."

Not a bad plan. It should work on small-fry brigands.

"What if the plan fails?" I asked.

"Then we would post soldiers in First Village to guard it while continuing our subjugation efforts," Ludwig answered without hesitation, likely having thought of the possibility beforehand. I could tell he had matured.

It was going to cost us time and money, but it was necessary to minimize the damage, so I approved. "Good. Then you can go with this plan."

“Understood. We shall begin operations immediately.” Ludwig saluted and walked toward the exit, but then he turned back, remembering something. “Miss Adele and Lady Julianne will depart soon. What will you do?”

“I’ll see them off.” It should bolster their morale.

I exited the tent with Ludwig and moved to the village’s entrance, finding Adele and Julianne both with a group of five soldiers each.

“Ludwig told me you were leaving, so I came.” The instant they heard my voice, the both of them turned my way and smiled. Apparently, fighting mere bandits didn’t faze them. “Your job is to kill the scoundrels in the Girard territory, but...” I slowly walked over to Adele and Julianne, then placed my hands on their shoulders. “You and the soldiers are the most important. If you sense danger, immediately withdraw. Got it?”

They nodded deeply. With this, they shouldn’t do anything unreasonable.

“I know the objective is to exterminate the bandits, but should we capture some alive?” Adele asked. She used the Twin Hydra Blades, which were highly lethal, so she must have wanted to be sure they should all die beforehand.

“It would cost money to keep them imprisoned, and I wouldn’t trust anything a brigand says anyway, so no, you can kill them all. It should be enough to investigate their base after.” Even if they were working for Baron Dulac, they would just be disposable pawns who didn’t know anything. As such, the objective was to wipe them out and nothing else.

“Understood! I shall kill all of your enemies, Dear, so please praise me afterward!” Julianne declared.

“I shall absolutely massacre them,” Adele followed. Then after a slight hesitation, she added, “So once everything is over, if you could please praise me too, Master Jack.”

Oh well, as long as they did a good job, I could do that much. I just hoped they wouldn’t let any of the soldiers die...

* * *

I—Julianne—was riding a cart together with the five soldiers borrowed from my husband, trying to lure in the bandits on the main road. Two soldiers were sitting cramped on the coachman's seat, disguised as a merchant and an adventurer. It looked just like a peddler with a single guard, but the rest of us were hiding beneath a cloth inside the cart, waiting for an ambush.

Based on the last reported assault, the brigands' provisions should be running low. We thought it was highly likely that they would be unable to endure the hunger any longer and assail us.

I would make them pay for stealing people's important resources—and for disturbing the order of my husband's domain. We needed to deal with them quickly for the security of the traveling merchants, and I would make sure of it myself.

"We must kill all the bandits. Do not let a single one get away," I declared, positively itching to murder the scoundrels. If I wanted to become a splendid knight like my father as soon as possible, I couldn't lose today.

"Of course. We swear to bring victory to Baron Girard and his wife," one of the soldiers said.

His wife! What a wonderful word! I started to fantasize about going on a date in town with my husband, hand in hand. It would be such a pleasant outing, looking around at weapons and armor. We could buy matching knives we would always keep close to us. It would be fantastic, like always having him near me.

"We shall soon arrive where the brigands are likely to appear," said the soldier in charge of driving, and he slowed the cart down.

Unfortunately, I needed to stop my fantasies and focus on work. I peeked outside through a gap in the cloth and saw grass as tall as a person growing everywhere around. It was a convenient environment to hide in, making it perfect for an ambush.

The sky was cloudy, darkening the surroundings and making the atmosphere slightly uncanny. That made me want to see my husband, but I endured the impulse. House Girard had many enemies, which meant fighting for survival. If my husband saw me show fear before the opponent, he might cast me aside.

I would rather die.

My only worth was in my fighting abilities, so I had to discard my feelings of fear and anxiety. I caressed my short spear to shake off my idle thoughts. It was kind of a ritual for me, and I always did it before a fight. That helped me quickly calm down.

The cart slowly advanced for a time, shaking all the while. Then suddenly, it stopped.

"Ouch!" I had been so focused on my short spear that I lost my balance and struck my head on the floor of the cart. I immediately got back in position, holding my forehead, and heard a pained cry from the horse.

"Enemy attack!" shouted one of the soldiers on the coachman's seat.

I got out of the wagon, tightly gripping my short spear, and checked the surroundings as I assessed the damage. The horse had been killed, pierced by several arrows, and three men who looked like bandits were standing in front of the cart. Behind were another eight men, and I could feel the presence of other people in the tall grass. We were completely surrounded.

"What should we do, Lady Julianne?" asked one of the soldiers who'd gotten out of the wagon with me. He was prepared to kill the bandits. There was no fear in his eyes—only the will to fight.

I acknowledged his resolve and announced the beginning of the battle.

"I will deal with the brigands behind. The two on the coachman's seat, you take care of the ones in front of us. Everyone else, go find the ones hiding in the grass. Kill them all!" I ordered, and I broke into a run.

The bandits turned their lustful gazes toward me the instant they noticed I was a woman. A chill ran down my spine, and a strong feeling of disgust assaulted me. I wasn't happy to have knaves like them see me as a woman—I only felt the urge to kill them.

"You are sinners who have disturbed the peace of the Girard territory. Atone with your lives!" I shouted, strengthening my body with mana, showing them even a woman like myself could exhibit strength above veteran warriors.

I closed the few meters' distance between us in a single step,

then thrust my short spear through the first man's chest, piercing his leather armor. He was shocked as he looked down toward the wound. His expression clearly showed that he couldn't believe what had just happened. Their movements were sluggish, proving they didn't have much combat experience. The soldiers should be able to deal with them without injury.

I pulled out my short spear in a way that wouldn't spatter me with blood while moving sideways and punching a nearby bandit. He fell to the ground with his legs spread, so I stomped on his crotch with all my strength. I heard a cracking sound, so I supposed he wouldn't be able to move for a while.

"You'll pay, woman!" The other brigands finally realized they had been tricked, and three of them attacked at once—two with axes in the front, and one wielding a sword overhead just behind them.

Using only one hand, I caught the axes with the shaft of my spear. There was a great impact, but I was stronger and resisted. With my other hand, I struck the flat part of the incoming blade, warding it off. Thanks to my gauntlet, I didn't hurt myself.

The bandits were staring at me, astonished.

"Do not think you can win against me when I am strengthening myself with mana!" I kicked the sword-wielding bandit in the stomach, blowing him away as he vomited blood.

The axe users flinched. If that was enough to scare them, then they shouldn't have bothered my husband in the first place!

I backstepped, which made the axes I had been stopping strike the ground. The bandits must not have been used to their weapons because they lost their balance, looking dumbstruck. I quickly stabbed them, and blood sprayed forth as they collapsed lifelessly to the ground. Considering they hadn't shown any reaction, they must not even have realized they had died. They were fortunate to meet their ends without pain.

I noticed that some blood had splattered on my iron boots, so I scrubbed them on the bandits' clothes.

"This is your punishment for disturbing the Girard barony," I said, slowly walking toward the remaining three brigands.

They were petrified with fright and had completely lost their will

to fight. They threw their weapons aside and pleaded with me.

"Forgive us!"

"We had to do it to survive!"

"It's not our fault that there's no decent work in this territory!"

They had no issues stealing things important to other people, but the instant their lives were at risk, they begged for mercy. They truly were the worst. I couldn't believe such despicable beings were people like me.

As my husband's wife, I had to give these cowards a fitting end. Avoiding their vitals, I stabbed them in various parts of their bodies. I didn't feel any guilt for these pests who infected the Girard territory as I watched them die one by one, screaming in agony.

Once they were all dead, I checked my surroundings. It seemed the other bandits on the road had been wiped out. I couldn't see any soldiers, but there were no bodies, so they should be safe. They weren't so weak that they would lose to mere brigands.

I went into the tall grass next to the road and advanced until I found a soldier gathering corpses.

"We have defeated all the bandits! No one was harmed!" Toell—if I remembered correctly—reported. He was splattered with blood but didn't seem injured.

"Where are the others?" I asked.

"Searching for survivors."

"I see. We should prioritize taking care of the bodies, then."

We dragged the corpses by their feet and lined them up next to our cart. We couldn't leave them alone, as they would give off a stench and attract beasts and monsters, which would threaten the security of the main road. We had planned to take them away in the wagon from the start.

Just as we finished gathering all the bodies in one place, the other soldiers returned. They were also splattered with blood, but like Toell, none were injured. The instant they saw me, they rushed over with smiles on their faces. They were just like puppies.

"Were there any survivors?" I asked.

"No. It appears we have eliminated them all," answered one of the soldiers.

"Good. Let's continue with the cleaning, then. You can put the corpses in the cart once you have identified them."

"Understood!"

The soldiers started to inspect the bandits' belongings. None of the men appeared to be hurt or exhausted, which was natural, considering I had trained them myself.

With this, I had accomplished my job flawlessly and achieved great results. If I continued to do my best for House Girard, the long-standing retainers should acknowledge me as worthy to be part of the household.

I hoped for that day to come soon.

* * *

Obeying Master Jack's orders, I—Adele—was climbing a mountain together with five soldiers. We were heading toward the base of the bandits using Gwynt's information while also following the remaining scent in the air and the footprints on the ground. They must have thought that they would never be attacked, because they weren't even trying to hide their traces. It was easier than tracking beasts.

"We must finish before *her*," I declared, and the soldiers nodded. Thanks to my thorough training, they were very obedient to my orders. They were strong enough to deal with mere bandits, so this should be over quickly.

And then Master Jack will praise me! No, that's not enough. I want a special reward. Maybe I should ask if we could sleep together while I embrace him and sniff him. I'm sure he would forgive me if I created a fait accompli by sneaking into his bed naked and—

"I heard something, Lady Adele," a soldier said. I had been so focused on my fantasies that I had missed the sound.

I stood still, closed my eyes, and concentrated on my ears. The soldiers' breathing, the rustling of the leaves, the chirping of the birds, the various sounds you could hear in a mountain—one by one, I removed unnecessary noises from my attention until what was left was the sound of footsteps on the earth and grass. They were walking on two legs! The villagers were forbidden to enter the

mountain, so the only bipeds besides the soldiers and me would be monsters or bandits.

Next, I focused on my nose and sniffed the air. I caught the beastly odor of people who hadn't bathed for days. Monsters smelled more like blood, so I was certain these were the evil brigands who had stolen the villagers' important resources!

We must quickly wipe them out!

"I found them. Let's go," I said.

"I will follow you anywhere!" declared one of the soldiers, stepping close enough to touch me.

"Stop right there," I ordered. I had taken the soldiers with me because they were necessary to not allow a single bandit to escape, but I hated having men other than Master Jack near me. And this one was even trying to touch me! He needed to know his place. "If you touch me, you're dead."

He froze. Naturally, I couldn't willfully kill one of the precious soldiers Master Jack had lent me, but threats should work.

However, for some reason, the soldier I had scolded looked happy, and the others were staring at him enviously. I couldn't understand their thoughts, and it kind of scared me. Not that I showed it. After all, I knew it was in men's nature to take advantage of women when they showed weakness. But I was different from my past self—I was strong now. I had to show some gravitas.

"Follow me," I commanded, trying to have the same patronizing tone as Master Jack, then I started to walk forward. I hoped I was acting like a proper unit leader.

Thanks to being used to mountain climbing, we had no issues proceeding forward, but even after a while, we still hadn't gotten closer to the smell of the bandits. They must have been moving deeper into the mountain. Judging from the direction, they weren't going to attack people, but were instead returning to their base.

We continued to follow the smell while keeping our distance until we reached our destination and arrived in front of the mouth of a cave in the mountain—exactly the place Gwynt had informed us would be their base. There weren't any guards, and it seemed empty, but I could smell the bandits' scent from deep inside the

darkness. I was certain they were there.

"Hide here. If more come, you can kill them," I said.

"Are you going alone, Lady Adele?"

"Yes. I won't lose to small fry like them."

The soldiers looked like they wanted to protest, but I ignored them and went into the cave. The interior was illuminated by lantern-like things, so my sight wasn't a problem, but my nose was. It stank so much I started to cry, and my brain was turning to mush. At this rate, I wasn't going to be able to fight, so I covered my nose with a cloth to protect it.

Yup, much better. Should be able to fight now.

Once ready, I proceeded forward until finding two men wielding rusted swords.

"Is that a bandit?" one asked.

"You a thief?" said the other. "There ain't nothin' to steal here!"

Apparently, the two had misunderstood who I was, likely because of the cloth hiding my face. They didn't think I was working for the lord of this land for a single instant.

The enemies charged at me without hesitation, so I unsheathed the Twin Hydra Blades I'd received from Master Jack and severed their heads as I passed between the two of them. They fell to the ground, blood gushing out of the bases of their necks.

"That's what you get for disturbing the peace of Master Jack's domain even though you're so weak. Maybe you could have lived longer if you had done that in Dulac's territory," I said with a sneer, but naturally, corpses couldn't reply.

I lightly swung my swords to shake off the blood and continued deeper into the cave. Several more brigands assaulted me on the way, but they were all so weak that a single swing of my blades was enough to deal with them.

Thank goodness the plan is to slaughter them all. If I had been asked to keep one—or worse, all of them—alive, it would have been rather difficult.

When I arrived at the place that should have been the deepest part of the cave, the unpleasant smell became stronger, even through my cloth mask. In the small space were ten naked men and

a dead woman on the ground, just as naked as they. Nobody at First Village had reported a kidnapping, so she had likely been abducted from somewhere else before being made their plaything and then killed.

Seething anger that came straight from my stomach and recollection of the fear I had felt when my master and fellow disciples had tried to assault me made a mess of my feelings, leaving me unable to think clearly.

My control over my mana weakened.

The beasts wearing human skin stared at me.

They shouted something, but I didn't listen.

My body moved on its own, swinging the Twin Hydra Blades.

I cut the beasts one after another.

When I came back to myself, my surroundings had become a sea of blood. I was the only one still alive in the cave—the rest were just corpses.

I panted heavily. I had been so focused on chopping them that I had forgotten to breathe. I could see pieces of flesh floating on the sea of blood, but thankfully, I'd had enough reason left to not harm their faces. After all, we needed to be able to identify them.

Now that there weren't any enemies present, I tried to calm down. I closed my eyes and breathed deeply while thinking of Master Jack. Unfortunately, the scent of blood was too strong, and I started to feel sick. My cloth mask wasn't enough, and I was on the verge of throwing up.

I quickly covered my mouth with my hand and sat a little ways away from the sea of blood. I still felt sick, but I was starting to calm down. After a few deep breaths, I finally managed to recompose myself.

I stood up and checked my surroundings, which were still filled with corpses. Taking a look at the dead woman, I saw that her body was in a pitiful state, so bringing her back to her village would only trouble them. I decided to bury her myself, but I unfortunately didn't have any tools to dig, so I needed to go back to First Village first.

"Please wait just a little longer." I muttered an apology and left the cave.

When I got out, I saw three corpses—likely bandits—at the feet of the soldiers. There had been more of them than I had expected. Perhaps they had been a famous group of brigands?

I should tell my doubts to Master Jack. If I'm right, he'll praise me!

"These were the last ones," reported one of the soldiers.

When I checked the bodies, I noticed traces of torture, so he must have heard that straight from them. Master Jack had told me that Kevin had instructed one of the men in torturing, so that must be him.

Anyway, now that all the bandits were dead, our job was done. It was time to return to First Village.

I'm sure I've finished before Julianne. I hope Master Jack will reward me with his affection for doing my best.

* * *

I returned to my tent after seeing Adele and Julianne off. If I had to compare this job to *Survival Strategies of a Corrupt Aristocrat*, it would be in the free quest category, so those two shouldn't have any issues dealing with it. I only needed to wait for their reports.

However, I couldn't waste my time doing nothing, so I continued going through my governing work.

I took one of the parchments from the pile on my desk—a report from First Village. A nearby bridge had collapsed, and they were unable to go to the other side anymore. The cause was deterioration. Because the villagers didn't have any money, they hadn't been able to repair it, and it had finally collapsed on its own.

The bridge was connected to the Dulac territory, so I considered not repairing it, but it was also frequently used by peddlers. So even if we dealt with the bandits, no bridge meant no merchants—and no solution to our lack of resources problem. That meant it needed to be rebuilt as soon as possible.

Jeez, this territory is really full of issues.

I wrote a decree to quickly rebuild the bridge and called Lumié to give it to the village chief.

Next was a report from Third Village. The instant I noticed the word "taxes," I perused it attentively to be sure it wasn't about tax evasion, then I signed it and put it to the side.

Thus, I continued to go through the pile of parchments until I suddenly heard noises coming from outside. Curious, I looked up from my document and realized it was dark outside, and a lantern had been hung on the tent's ceiling. Lumié must have lit it without bothering me during my work. I had been so focused that I hadn't even noticed her.

Wondering what was happening outside, I placed my pen on my desk and stood up.

"I have completed the task you gave me, Dear!"

"I finished first!"

Julianne and Adele barged into my tent. They didn't appear to have been injured and were full of energy.

"Good work. Tell me the details. You go first, Julianne." I knew they would fight to see who would talk first, so I decided their turns. Adele looked a little dissatisfied, but I needed her to bear with it. I couldn't prioritize her over my fiancée where other people could see us.

"The bandits attacked us while we were disguised as merchants, and we killed them all! Nobody was hurt!" Julianne reported.

"Were they *just* bandits?" I asked.

"They were not used to battle and used their weapons inappropriately, so I do not think they were soldiers or knights from another territory disguising themselves as brigands."

So it wasn't Baron Dulac trying to start something with his soldiers.

"Have you identified them?"

"Yes. Several of them were men who had left First Village a few years ago," Julianne answered.

"Was it to reduce the number of mouths to feed?" Until recently, my people had been close to death because of the heavy taxes. True, they had made hidden fields, but they still must have reduced their numbers to secure more food.

"No, they left wanting to become adventurers."

So it was for work. Anyone could become an adventurer, and people without work often went straight for it. However, it was difficult to earn a good income because you could only do odd jobs if you weren't strong enough to defeat monsters, which was barely enough for everyday life.

In other words, they had lost their places in the village and had failed to earn enough money as adventurers, so they ended up banding together and becoming bandits. That made sense.

"I see. Please continue to search for the others' identities."

"Yes, Dear!"

I was done with Julianne, so I asked Adele next. "What about you?"

"I went into the bandits' base and wiped them out," she replied.

That's it? Nothing else to report? Something must have happened for her to feel so murderous.

"How was it inside?" I asked.

"There was a dead woman."

"So there was a victim." That explained Adele's reaction. She must have remembered her past fears. I would need to provide some care later. "Do you know where she came from?"

"She was in a very pitiful state, so I do not think it will be possible. We are certain she was not from First Village, and I think she came from a different domain."

"Why is that?"

"From the shreds of her clothes, I could see the quality of the fabric was far better than what our villagers wear."

Basically, she hadn't been wearing miserable clothing like the people of my demesne. The explanation made sense, and that meant the brigands Adele had killed hadn't been starving people from the Girard territory and had come from somewhere else.

"They must have entered the domain illegally without passing through a checkpoint," I said. Such people were usually criminals from other fiefs. We had to look them up. "Perhaps they have bounties in other territories. Go check it out! Bring me the head of any whose face resembles one of the wanted posters."

"Understood!" Adele replied and rushed out of the tent. Once she

had obtained the wanted posters from other demesnes, she should go check the bandits' faces.

"Why do you need to verify their faces, Dear?" Julianne asked.

"If some of them are criminals from Baron Dulac's territory, he'll get an excuse to send soldiers here."

It would likely go like this: *"Criminals from my fief have fled to the Girard territory. It will stain the reputation of my house if I let them run free. We will compensate you, so please allow me to dispatch my soldiers."*

I didn't want such a thing to happen. Naturally, even if it *did* happen, I could refuse his demand without penalty, but it would only worsen the situation unless I had a good reason. In the worst case, he could even use the excuse that I was insulting his honor by disregarding him and just come to attack with his army, which would mean the start of a war between our domains. Unless the royal family or the hero interfered, it wouldn't end until one of us lost. Considering the Girard territory's financial state, I wanted to postpone the start of the war as much as possible and needed to eliminate all the possibilities that could lead to it.

"I see... But I do not think you need to worry so much, Dear."

"What do you mean?"

"My father is the only knight serving Baron Dulac, and while I have heard his heir is brilliant, surely he is not that strong. The baron's army is only made up of about a hundred soldiers, which is not enough to wage war against the Girard territory."

That was surprising. I had expected the difference in our military forces to be greater than that. Perhaps Adele, Julianne, and I would be enough to win. But I wanted to minimize our losses, so even if we were going to win, I preferred to buy more time.

"What about mercenaries? How many could he hire?"

In the game, you could hire mercenaries if you didn't have enough soldiers. I remembered using them as disposable pawns in the early game, as there weren't any good characters to use. Baron Dulac could do the same.

"I heard that he does not have enough funds for that. There are even rumors that he is in debt, so even if he *did* employ some

mercenaries, it would only be for a few days," she answered.

Mercenaries followed their contracts, so once their terms were over, they would stop fighting for you. If what Julianne had told me was true, Baron Dulac shouldn't be reckless enough to attack me immediately.

"Did you learn that from Ser Yon?"

"Yes."

While her father had been sent to a remote area in the Dulac territory, he had been a knight directly serving the baron until recently, so the intel must be accurate. It should be fine to trust Julianne's words.

"I understand the situation." I stood up and walked closer to Julianne. "You did your job perfectly. Good work." She had asked me to praise her, so I obliged. Considering her slightly flushed cheeks, I must have done the right thing. "You must be tired, so you can rest now. We're going back to the mansion tomorrow."

"Understood, Dear!" Julianne beamed like the sun before returning to the women's tent.

Now that I was left alone in my tent, I went back to doing my government work.

Later in the night, Adele finally returned. As I had feared, one of the bandits had been a criminal from the Dulac territory.

Just like Julianne, I rewarded Adele with excessive praise and sent her away. Then I called for one of the sleeping soldiers and ordered him to bring the criminal's head to the Dulac demesne.

With this, he wouldn't be able to use the bandits as an excuse to attack.

Chapter 2: Peaceful Days in the Girard Territory

Kevin came as I was doing my usual work in my office. “You have received two letters.”

He gave them to me, and I checked their wax seals. One was the emblem of House Froid, meaning it was likely from Ser Yon. The other was from the hero—Seravimia. It must be the reply to my roundabout complaint that my demesne was being targeted because of her so she should take responsibility.

I was curious about both, but I decided to read Seravimia’s first.

I broke the wax seal and found two pages inside. I started with the one in front.

It began with a short greeting, then said that she had put pressure on the nobles helping Baron Dulac. To be more precise, she had told Count Belmond, who was our liege-lord, to not help Baron Dulac and to not make a move on the Girard territory. As expected of the hero, she had a lot of clout. At the end, she made a point that I owed her for it. As if I would thank her just for that.

Next, I went through the second page, which was apparently bad news. Even with the hero telling him off, Baron Dulac wasn’t giving up. To obtain my fief, he had used a lot of money and indebted himself by borrowing funds from other noble houses. Therefore, if he gave up now, he would be unable to repay his debts and lose his domain, so he couldn’t back out. Apparently, even merchants didn’t want to lend him money, and he was slowly nearing his ruin. People could do unimaginable things out of desperation, so I had better use Seravimia to prepare a trump card to not be dragged into Baron Dulac’s self-destruction. However, as the hero, Seravimia couldn’t side with me directly. The most she could do was send me helpers. I decided I would ask her to lend me the Verdant Wind sisters. It

seemed she wanted to make me owe her, so she should accept.

I placed the letters on my desk and looked at Kevin. "It seems Baron Dulac alone will continue to target my demesne."

"Oh..." Kevin narrowed his eyes in quiet anger. He truly was loyal to House Girard. "What will you do, Master Jack?"

I was certain he was testing me. His opinion of me would change depending on whether I would wait and see or go on the offensive. If I acted too timidly, he would likely think less of me.

Personally, while I was fine going on the offensive, I wanted to at least have a good pretext. My army's morale wouldn't be high enough without one. It was important to make them think they were on the side of justice. So long as they did, they would be ready to risk their lives in battle.

"I need more information. What did you learn from Kyle?" I asked hopefully. Kyle was the representative of the Welza Company. Perhaps he knew something that would serve as a good reason to wage war.

"Only that he has helped Baron Dulac from behind the scenes," he replied.

Kyle had been thrown into the dungeon and tortured thoroughly. I had gone to see him once, and he had been in such a pitiful state that it had made me feel sick, so he must have confessed everything he knew. I had hoped he would give us more evidence.

"What a useless man," I spit.

"Should I dispose of him?"

"Yeah. Execute him with his son, Spencer. Make it public that they betrayed me—betrayed an aristocrat."

"Understood."

I would never forgive anyone who defied me and would thoroughly destroy them. Such was my family motto.

"But without new intel, I don't have a good pretext to attack. We'll need to wait and see for a while."

"Very well," Kevin answered. His expression didn't change, but I must have gotten a passing mark.

Our conversation over, I read Ser Yon's letter next. It was about his wife—Hilde—coming to the Girard territory.

"Hilde is coming in two weeks. We need to prepare a bedroom and a proper welcome by then," I said.

"Where should her room be?"

"It can be anywhere as long as it's far from Julianne's. I leave the choice to you."

If their rooms were too close, they could easily see each other, making it easier for them to collude together. By distancing them physically, it would be harder for them to communicate. At first, I had even considered constructing a detached building just for her, but that would be far too cold a treatment. If I wanted Julianne to keep a high opinion of me, I needed to treat her mother right.

"Then I shall tell Lumié and begin the preparations," Kevin said.

"I'm counting on you."

Kevin bowed and left my office.

"Phew..." I relaxed and leaned on the backrest of my chair.

Man, it's really tiring to talk with him...

In *Survival Strategies of a Corrupt Aristocrat*, the early game was about fights inside the Girard territory, then the midgame was about the many battles against the other domains in the kingdom. After a while, you were given a choice between starting a revolution and becoming king, exploiting your people more and rising to a viscount, or cooperating with foreign nobles and destroying the Valzza Kingdom. Basically, each path was about Jack acting like a villain, far removed from justice, doing things like invading other fiefs without a good reason or even having enemy lords assassinated.

I had become Jack around the early game, but apparently, we were already proceeding to the midgame. I expected my war with Baron Dulac would only be the first of many.

In war, there was no difference between nobles and bandits—they killed, plundered, and violated all the same. And it was also when betrayals happened. A battle where humans' ugly nature would be laid bare was about to begin.

If the attack came from Baron Dulac, it would occur near First Village. I needed to make thorough preparations for the coming

fight.

* * *

Two weeks later, I was working in my office as usual when Lumié entered the room and said, "Dame Hilde has arrived."

I had been so busy that I had forgotten today was the day. I quickly finished writing my decree and placed my pen on my desk. "Is her bedroom ready?"

"Of course. Following Lady Julianne's advice, we decorated the room fully in white with a touch of pink. Moreover, as it seems she likes to put maquillage on, we furnished it with a large dresser."

If Hilde's room were prepared to her liking, she should feel welcome. She was my main source of information about Baron Dulac until the end of our strife, so she was worth the expenses.

"After guiding Hilde to her room, have her take a bath. I'll wait in the parlor, so bring her to me once she's ready," I ordered.

"Understood." Lumié placed both of her hands before her skirt and bowed, then quietly left my office.

I called Kevin, gave him an order to dispatch some troops, then returned to my bedroom, where I changed into my suit that bore the crest of a poisonous snake.

After that, I went to the empty parlor and sat on the sofa for approximately thirty minutes, reading my gaming notes to pass time, when eventually a knock brought me back to reality.

"Dame Hilde is with me," Lumié said from behind the door.

"Enter," I replied, standing up and pocketing my notes.

The door opened, then Lumié entered and stood next to the entrance.

Next, a woman gracefully walked inside, her waist-long silver hair swaying behind her. She had slightly slanted eyes and appeared to be quite strong-willed. Her blue dress had a revealing neckline, and the hem of her skirt was embroidered with flying butterflies. The fabric was sleek, so even someone who didn't know much about clothing like me knew that it was of high quality. In other words, it was a dress made to meet someone of high status. To top it all off,

she was wearing a necklace with a green gemstone that rested atop her large chest, making it hard to look away from it.

"I am Hilde, wife of Knight Yon and mother of Julianne. Thank you for allowing me to stay in your residence."

"I'm the sixth head of House Girard—Jack Girard. I'm pleased to welcome you here, Hilde... No, Mother," I said, paying some lip service. She was important to Julianne's education and to keep a connection to Ser Yon, so I wanted to improve her opinion of me.

"My, already treating me like your mother?" Hilde replied happily, but I couldn't discern if her joy was real. She'd had a smile plastered on her face ever since she had entered the room, so I didn't know if she was wearing her heart on her sleeve or just mechanically smiling at everything. Unlike her husband, who had been easy to read, she knew how to act like a noble. That made them a balanced couple.

"Naturally," I replied. "I want to maintain a long-lasting and close relationship with House Froid." Even that didn't shake her smile. I couldn't get a read on her. "Please, sit."

"Thank you. Well then, excuse me." She acted a little less formally, which wasn't an issue as I had just told her she was family. In fact, I wouldn't mind if she were even more casual.

Hilde stood in front of the sofa opposite to me, spread her skirt so that it wouldn't crease, and sat at the same time as me.

"I have brought black tea." Lumié pushed a cart with cups and a teapot next to the table between Hilde and me. She placed a cup before each of us and poured tea before going away. I was impressed by how smooth her movement had been.

"What a wonderful fragrance. May I?" Hilde asked.

"Of course."

With my permission, Hilde brought her cup to her nose, enjoyed the aroma, then took a small sip. "It is very sweet. I have heard as much from my daughter, but the black tea of the Girard territory is truly delicious."

"It's the only thing my domain can boast about," I replied and also took a sip of my tea. The sweetness eased my tired brain, refreshing me. I reflexively let a relaxed sigh escape me.

"There is something that has been bothering me," Hilde said. Her

serious tone brought back the tension in my body.

Just what is she gonna say? If she's gonna ask for money, then we're severing off all ties right away.

"Yes?"

"Why did you choose my daughter?"

"Because she's a good woman."

"Despite the large scar from her neck to her chest?" From the way she was asking, I could tell she really didn't understand my choice. It seemed she was worried for her daughter and wasn't asking as a noblewoman, but as a mother.

"Naturally, there are men who would find her scar to be a flaw. But personally, I don't care. I didn't choose my fiancée for her looks."

"Then what pleased you about Julianne?"

"Her personality. I like a woman who is ready to do her best for me. The fact that she likes fighting is also a plus. Moreover, she's kind toward my retainers, she abides by my house's policies, and she doesn't spend money wastefully. She's more than qualified to be my wife."

"Thank you for your detailed answer." For the first time, Hilde's expression changed, relief clear on her face. She had removed her mask as a noblewoman.

"Unfortunately, it isn't as though she's free of flaws," I continued.

"Did my daughter do something inappropriate?" While she was still smiling, her demeanor went back from a mother to being the wife of an aristocrat. That meant she would judge what I would say more on reason than emotion, which was perfect for me. My demand should be approved.

"She's a little too lively to be presented as my wife to other nobles. I don't mind how she acts at home, but she needs to be presentable as the wife of a baron."

"Ah... Yes, of course that would happen. She always ran away from my lessons. Do not worry, I shall take care of her education from now on."

If Julianne heard that, she would scream, but I didn't care. Anyway, if Hilde was so confident she could do something about the

matter, then I would entrust her with it. However, as she was only the wife of a knight, her knowledge might not be enough, so I couldn't leave everything to her alone.

"You heard us, Lumié. Help Mother with Julianne's education."

"Understood."

Lumié had been serving a baron for years, so Julianne's education should be fine if she were to share her knowledge. The study had good reference books too, so they should be able to teach Julianne enough manners for her to not be impolite.

With this, my business with Hilde was over. I didn't have anything else I wanted to discuss, so I decided to use my work as an excuse to leave. Not wanting to waste my black tea, I finished it and prepared to stand when Kevin suddenly entered the parlor.

"We have a guest," I complained, showing my irritation, but internally, I was unsettled. Unlike Ludwig, Kevin was a reliable man—he wouldn't bother me unless the matter was urgent. Something bad must have happened for him to interrupt my talk with Hilde.

I patiently waited for Kevin to speak.

"An emissary from Baron Dulac has come," he said.

So he stopped maneuvering behind the scenes and came straight at me, huh?

Naturally, it wasn't going to be a message asking for me to hand him my domain, but there should be a purpose behind it. Depending on the content of the message, war might start immediately.

"And?" I urged him to continue.

"A bandit from the Dulac barony has fled to the Girard territory, so he is asking for the right to dispatch troops. How should we reply?"

What the hell? Was that emissary an idiot? One of my soldiers had already exchanged the head of the bandit for his bounty. The fact that we had properly received the money proved that the transaction had been registered, and the matter should be over. Did the messenger not know about this? If so, it would be great if he would listen to our explanation, but something told me that wouldn't happen.

"We have already delivered the bandit's head and received his

bounty. The matter should be settled, no?”

“Yes. The emissary is also aware,” Kevin replied.

“Then who is he talking about?”

“Another bandit. The envoy is asking us to cooperate with them to search for him.”

What a blatant lie and obvious trap. He just wanted to send troops into my demesne. As if I’d ever allow that.

“Tell the envoy I refuse, and he can leave,” I said.

“Are you certain this is a good idea? It might start rumors,” Kevin warned me. He was, of course, talking about the fact that Baron Dulac might just spread rumors that a brigand from his domain had fled to mine, and once damage to my territory actually happened, he would have an excuse to dispatch his troops even if I refused. Moreover, it would also scare away traveling merchants.

Naturally, I knew that, and I had even thought of a way to avoid such a thing from happening.

“The instant rumors start to spread, we’ll put our all into suppressing bandits. As long as no harm is actually done, the rumors should stop on their own.”

I’d use Adele, Julianne, and Gwynt to deal with any bandit Baron Dulac sent my way. That was basically brute-forcing the issue, but it should be enough to buy the time I needed.

“I have something I wish to tell you about Baron Dulac,” Hilde interjected.

Now that I thought about it, she’d spent years in the Dulac barony as Ser Yon’s wife, so maybe she knew things I didn’t. “Yes?”

“The baron’s finances have been tight because of his splurge in buying big monsters and special magic tools. He also has debts that he will need to repay soon, so I do not think he is wishing for a prolonged war.”

I had learned the same from Julianne and Seravimia. It seemed Baron Dulac’s lack of money was well-known, so perhaps even the commoners of his domain knew about it.

“I already know that. What is your point?”

“We know his weakness. Should we not use it?”

Ah, I finally got it. The enemy was in a hurry, but I wasn’t. So I

should use that difference.

"You're suggesting to waste time until he just ruins himself."

"Yes." Hilde smiled even though we were talking about her husband's liege. She was still a member of House Froid, so the Dulac territory's decline should trouble her, and yet...

I decided to probe her a little. "Are you sure you want me to do that? It would put Ser Yon in a difficult position."

"My husband serves his lord fully aware of the risks. Neither of us would complain."

"Even if that means he and your daughter might fight again?"

"Naturally. No matter the outcome, I would not blame you. Also..." Hilde paused, looked straight into my eyes, and continued without smiling. "I believe you will not do anything that would sadden Julianne, Baron Girard."

I could feel from her words that she worried far more about her daughter than herself and her husband. How could she trust me when we had just met? Did she not consider the possibility of my betrayal? "I shall do my best, but I can't promise anything. Will that be enough?"

"Yes. I am eagerly waiting for the downfall of the man who discarded my husband like a disposable pawn."

What a scary woman—her eyes weren't laughing at all. Apparently, she couldn't forgive Baron Dulac for deceiving Ser Yon. I wasn't sure if I should call her love deep, but there was no doubt that she cherished her family. Unfortunately for her, if I deemed it necessary, I would defeat Ser Yon and sacrifice Julianne without hesitation. That was why I only said I would do my best and didn't promise anything.

"I'm also looking forward to it," I said.

Hilde and I both laughed at the same time, wishing for the downfall of our common enemy—Baron Dulac. That ended my discussion with her, and I turned back to Kevin.

"Change of plans. Tell the envoy that I need to think about it and that he can stay here until I make my decision. We'll postpone our reply as much as possible, then ask for a meeting with Baron Dulac."

"When would that meeting be?" Kevin asked.

"I'm busy, so it won't be for at least a year."

Kevin's lips curled into a villainous grin. He approved of my plan to waste time. "Understood. I shall welcome the emissary and tell him so."

"I'm counting on you. I'll go see him later."

Kevin bowed and left the parlor.

We're accomplices now, Hilde. I'll make sure you stay with us until we're done with Baron Dulac.

"That puts an end to our discussion. Lumié will explain everything you need to know about the mansion. I entrust you with Julianne's education."

"Please leave my daughter to me. And I hope that you too..." Hilde trailed off.

"Yeah, I know. I'll do my best."

Man, she truly was one scary woman. I didn't want her to bear a grudge against me, so I'd do what I could to protect her family.

We held off Baron Dulac's envoy for five days, entertaining him with nice meals and alcohol. During that time, I gathered the people needed to repair the bridge near First Village. Thankfully, it went without a hitch, and the rebuilding started faster than planned.

While my enemy was wasting his time, I steadily restored my domain.

* * *

Adele, Gwynt, and I were looking at a river near First Village. Several people were carrying timber over to repair the bridge. They were all paid handsomely, so none of them were slacking—they were all working earnestly.

Basically, it was essentially public works. By hiring the people directly and remunerating them, I was also enriching the territory as a whole. I didn't have the money before, but thanks to seizing the Welza Company's funds, I could finally do it.

"When will you be done?" I asked the foreman, who had a towel wrapped around his buzz cut.

“Why, if it ain’t our baron himself! Should be done in two weeks or so if the weather holds up, m’lord,” he replied. He had bad teeth and his body was drenched in sweat, so he really stank.

Adele, having a good nose, stepped back a few paces with a grimace, but I smiled and stepped forward instead. I couldn’t give a bad impression to my people, after all. In the game, Jack didn’t make allies and picked fights with everyone, which led to his downfall. I didn’t want to end like that, so I needed to be careful. If I had to bear with the stench, then I would.

“That’s faster than I expected. There aren’t any problems, right?” I asked, glaring at the carpenters leering at Adele. I understood that working away from home built up a lot of frustration, but I couldn’t allow anything that would disrupt the order of my fief—even if that meant executing precious workers.

“Of course. Everyone’s workin’ just fine,” he replied energetically, but he looked away. He was hiding something.

“I hate lies and deceit. If you want to talk, it’s now or never,” I said, placing my hand on the hilt of the Vampire Sword.

It only took a few seconds for him to lose to the pressure. “...They drink a lot, so there’s been a few fights.”

“Has anyone been injured?” I asked.

“Only bruised faces. Nothin’ affectin’ the repairs.”

Many carpenters were rough-mannered, so I supposed squabbles were bound to happen. As long as nobody died, I would leave the supervision to the foreman.

“Then I’ll overlook it this time, but if a big problem happens, I’ll be the one to deal with it. Got it?”

“We won’t do anythin’ that’ll trouble you, m’lord.”

“I hope so.” Then I placed my hand on the foreman’s shoulder and brought my mouth closer to his ear, enduring the stench. “If you finish in time, you’ll get a special reward.”

If I wanted the people of my fief to be obedient and loyal, I couldn’t just use the stick—I had to show them the carrot too. Moreover, just because I was giving them money didn’t mean I was losing all of it. After all, the carpenters would use it to buy alcohol and women. The more alcohol they consumed, the weaker their

reasoning would become, and the more they would buy—and I would get back a part of that in the form of taxes. In fact, I would say that at least half of what I would pay them would return to me. Most of the money stayed in my domain anyway, so it felt more like lending them money than paying them.

Making people think they're earning money while you're exploiting them is the true way of a bookmaker... I mean, a lord of a territory.

"That's great! The boys are gonna love that!" the foreman cheered.

"You can rejoice all you want, but don't cut corners. If the bridge doesn't last more than a year, I'll execute you. So do your job thoroughly."

"Of course! A year? It'll last at least a dozen, m'lord!"

"Good. I look forward to the result." I clapped his shoulder and walked away. Once I was far enough for him not to hear me, I turned toward Adele and said, "Once the bridge is done, it'll be easier for peddlers to come from the Dulac territory."

That road was secure and faster than the others, so they would use it rather than the ones passing through other domains. Moreover, not only would getting more traveling merchants replenish our resources, their guards would also use money, which would stimulate the economy. So I really needed the bridge to be repaired as soon as possible, and that meant being vigilant of all the possible hindrances. What came to mind first was Baron Dulac making a move, such as sending false workers to destroy the bridge during the night. I had to increase the security of the site.

"Adele. You'll take ten soldiers and defend this place. I've already given a decree to dispatch soldiers to Kevin, so there shouldn't be an issue."

"Understood! Can I select whoever I want?"

"Ask Ludwig for his opinion."

Adele was the new recruits' instructor, but she didn't have the authority to choose the troops to dispatch. Even if it was a pain to go through the entire process, Adele couldn't just skip it—it would increase her influence and reflect badly on Ludwig, who was

supposed to be the captain. I had to be careful to not overcentralize authority and instead spread it around—that was the ABCs of risk management.

"Gwynt," I continued.

"Yes?"

"Do you have any new intel about the Dulac barony?" I asked. It had been a few days since we had sent the envoy back, so the intelligence unit might have gathered new information.

"One of my subordinates who has infiltrated the Dulac territory heard in a tavern that the baron was selling the things in his mansion to gather money."

"Is that true?"

"It should be. Several people have seen wagons loaded with goods leave his residence."

If the information was reliable, that meant Baron Dulac had sold his stuff to repay his debt. However, it shouldn't have been enough to repay everything—only a few thousand gold coins.

Now he shouldn't have a way to raise funds anymore—he was at an impasse. And it was when people were cornered that they would do something stupid trying to reverse the situation. I couldn't stop myself from grinning as I imagined Baron Dulac ruining himself.

No, that's not good. I shouldn't think I've won until I've crushed him. I must stay on guard until I've witnessed his downfall with my own eyes.

* * *

A few days later, in the morning...

Adele would go defend the bridge with the soldiers tomorrow. That meant we wouldn't see each other for a while, so I decided to train with her. It had been a rather long time since our last spar.

With a cute yell, Adele swung her wooden swords at both of my sides. I dodged with a backstep, then thrust my wooden blade, which had been cut to be the same length as the Vampire Sword.

My timing was perfect. I had acted just after her attack, so it should have been impossible to avoid. And yet, the next instant I felt

pain in my right arm and let go of my weapon. Adele had struck me with her wooden sword.

"You were too hasty to win," Adele said.

"Did you fake swinging at full force while actually holding back?"

"Exactly! I lured you to attack me and countered."

I listened to her boast while rubbing my pained arm.

"You have a lot of mana and your movements are not bad, Master Jack, but you do not have much combat experience. It is easy to deceive you."

"True enough..."

I'd been had by Adele's feints countless times, such as her moving her right sword to make me try to block it, only to be struck in the stomach by her left. Not only was I deceived every time, each blow was strong enough to leave a bruise, making me writhe in pain.

"How can I identify a feint?" I asked.

"Well, you need to have keen observation, calm judgment, and of course, experience. Though that applies to all aspects of combat, not only feints."

"It's gonna take a while for me to gain all of that."

"Such is life, so let's do our best together," Adele lightly replied, throwing away her wooden swords. Then she stood before me and checked my right arm. "Your bone seems fine, but you should drink a fifth-grade potion just in case."

"They're pretty pricey despite not being that effective. I don't want to use one just for this." They could only heal light injuries, but that didn't change the fact they were made by alchemists. Commoners only used them when they really needed to, and I was the same. I also had Adele and Julianne keep some with them, but I had instructed them to not waste the potions. After all, I would rather use money to protect and enrich my domain.

"But there is no replacement for you, Master Jack. You need to always be healthy."

Adele couldn't go easy on me while training, but as my guard and vassal, she didn't want me to be hurt either. It must have been quite the dilemma for her.

"The pain and the bruise are proof of my inexperience. Keeping them will serve as a reminder." I wanted to economize as much as possible, even more so considering the coming war with Baron Dulac. I would rather not draw on our potion reserves.

"Master Jack..." Adele only called my name, understanding that anything she would say wouldn't budge my mind.

The discussion over, I put some cheap salve I had brought to the courtyard on my bruise and bandaged my arm. Adele looked at me, puffing her cheeks in dissatisfaction.

This was kind of awkward. Perhaps talking about work would change the mood.

"You'll start defending the bridge from tomorrow on," I said, "but there's something I want you to be careful of, so listen carefully." Adele nodded. "Because you'll be near the border of the domain, Baron Dulac will surely make a move. He'll likely send a few soldiers."

"Why?"

"He's gonna complain that I'm invading his territory."

"But that is wrong!"

"I know, but I'm sure he'll do it. Being unable to repay his debts is making him impatient, so he's likely to use any means necessary."

As long as he had a good pretext, neither the royal family nor the hero could intervene. I was almost certain he would act like I had just said. He didn't have the funds to hire mercenaries or adventurers, so the only thing he could do was send his troops to the opposite side of the bridge. Fortunately, they shouldn't be a threat as long as Adele was present.

"If his men attack from the other side, focus on defense. But if they put a single foot on the Girard territory, kill them."

If Baron Dulac were the first one to invade my domain, I would have a good pretext to retaliate and invade back.

"Are you sure it is fine to be so passive? We might suffer casualties," Adele said.

"If you spot the enemy, have the carpenters stop their work and tell everyone—soldiers included—to retreat. If someone gets hurt even then, there's nothing we can do about it. However, if someone

dies, that'll work as an excuse to crush Baron Dulac."

"This is too complicated for me, but I trust your judgment, Master Jack."

Well, as long as her understanding was fine when on the battlefield, there shouldn't be a problem. I had also asked Seravimia to send reinforcements, so we should be fine in terms of manpower.

"Anyway, let's get back to our spar." I still hadn't exercised enough. Done with my first aid, I quickly stood up, raised my wooden sword overhead, and swung it down without giving Adele the chance to get ready. It was her fault for not reacting immediately.

"You are too slow." Adele moved to the side as though skating on ice and easily avoided my strike.

Still, that was within my expectations. I was weaker than her, so I didn't think I would hit her with my first attack. I changed the trajectory of my swing midway into a horizontal slash, hoping to take her by surprise. And yet, Adele easily parried my attack with her wooden swords, which I hadn't even noticed her picking up.

"Unlike your personality, the way you fight is very honest. I just need to look at your gaze to know where you are aiming."

One part of that was uncalled for! I thought, but I pushed harder instead of saying it aloud. I released my mana, strengthening my body, but Adele did the same. Because I was a man, I was stronger than her in terms of plain physical strength, but she was better at controlling her mana when strengthening herself, so that made us approximately equal.

No, that was a lie. I was just trying to keep up appearances. Adele was the stronger one and pushed back my strike.

"You are not using your body correctly. You should not only rely on your arm strength, you need to use your hips and legs too. Just like...this!" Adele repelled my wooden sword upward.

My right arm was raised, and I couldn't put strength in my legs. I was full of openings, and of course, my opponent wouldn't miss the perfect opportunity before her. Adele swung her wooden blades horizontally toward my stomach, and I instinctively put strength in my abs to endure the incoming pain.

"Got you!" However, just before hitting me, Adele let go of her weapons and hugged me, burying her face in my stomach and sniffing me. "Just because you cannot move does not mean you should give up on dodging."

She was right. You shouldn't give up on living until the end. Sometimes, it was thanks to your determination to live that you could find the chance to reverse the situation. If Adele hadn't let go of her wooden swords, she could have broken some of my bones, and if it had been real swords, she could have bisected me, even if I had worn armor.

"You need to be punished for your mistake," Adele said.

"Master?" I noticed something ominous in her tone, but it was too late. She swept my legs and pushed me down. Thankfully, she supported my head with her hand so that it didn't hit the ground, but that wasn't what she should have been paying attention to!

"This is also part of your combat training. Sometimes, enemies will grapple with you like this. Try to escape from me."

We weren't wearing defensive gear, so her modest chest was squeezed against mine. I didn't want rumors of me being a womanizer going around, so I did my best to try to escape, but I couldn't move because she was restraining my arms and legs. Adele was lighter than me, so I thought it would be easy to push her back, but strength alone wasn't enough. I tried to raise my hips and turn us upside down, but she was holding down my center of gravity.

"At this rate, I will be hugging you forever, Master Jack."

She sure sounds happy. Heck, her tail is swaying furiously. Maybe she's been lonely since I've been too busy to train with her? If so, I guess I need to help relieve her stress. And I'm tasking her with the important job of guarding the bridge, so I should raise her motivation.

"As if I would give up without retaliating. Just you wait—I'm gonna turn the tables on you," I replied.

Still on my back, I rotated clockwise, looking for an opportunity to raise my hips and turn us upside down. Now that I was seriously resisting, Adele had to apply more strength, which exhausted her, and her breathing was becoming heavier.

Being glued to each other made us sweat, and yet, I thought she smelled nice. Her body was soft, and I didn't find her sticking to me to be unpleasant. In fact, I wouldn't mind if we stayed like this for a while.

Despite being pinned down and trying my best to escape, I was only focusing on her womanly features. Such was the nature of men.

"I will not let you win. We will stay like this until you use up all of your strength!" Adele declared.

"I won't lose to you in stamina, Master!"

"I am not so weak that I would lose to my disciple!"

Hearing her provocation really made me want to win. I moved more intensely until, finally, I felt the restraint around my legs weakening. I jumped at the opportunity and freed my legs, then I tried to trap Adele between them, but...

"You are too naive!"

The opening had been part of her plan. I'd been had by her feint once again.

Adele nimbly rotated her body and sandwiched my face and neck between her thighs. Her crotch covered my mouth and my nose, suffocating me.

"Are you giving up?" she asked, her tone boastful.

However, I still hadn't given up. I tried to bend my back and catch Adele's head between my own legs, but I failed. Next, I tried to use my arms, but my vision suddenly turned black. The physical activity coupled with her choking had deprived me of oxygen.

As I was starting to lose consciousness, Adele released me.

I coughed violently, breathing in fresh air. If she had continued to choke me for another few seconds, I would have fainted. The difference in strength between us was so large that I hadn't even had the slightest chance to reverse the situation.

"I think this is enough training for today," Adele said.

"I can...still..."

"No. Resting is just as important as training. So please rest."

As her disciple, I couldn't object to that. Oh well, practice was over for the day, then.

"Fine. But I won't lose next time."

“I will win next time too.” Adele smiled so happily that my frustration from losing didn’t last long.

I stayed on the ground until my breathing calmed down, then stood up and put away my wooden sword.

Adele looked a little reluctant to part, but after a few seconds she headed toward the barracks, likely going to train the soldiers. Just what kind of monstrous stamina did she have? I was so exhausted I could barely move...

“I’m hungry...”

As I dragged my tired body toward the dining room, walking through the plain corridor without decorations, I met Hilde, who was wearing a comfortable, light-green dress.

“Good morning, Baron Girard,” she greeted me, curtsying.

“You seem in good health. Are you used to living here now?” I asked.

“Everyone is so kind to me that I feel even more at home here than in the Dulac barony.”

I didn’t want rumors that I was treating my mother-in-law coldly to spread, so I was relieved to hear that.

“Good,” I replied shortly, too tired for a long conversation, and moved on.

“Baron Girard,” Hilde called out, making me stop.

“What?”

“I am on my way to meet Julianne. Would you like to come with me?”

She must have wanted to show me that she had taught Julianne enough manners to be presentable. While I wanted to see Julianne’s progress, I was too tired and hungry for that.

“Sorry, but I’m on my way to eat. Then I have work after that.”

“What a shame. I shall invite you again in the near future, then,” Hilde replied, her expression unchanging. Her tone was the same as usual too, so I thought it would be fine to go on my way, but I had a hunch that I shouldn’t do that.

Perhaps I was unconsciously sensing something behind her words? Like Lumié, Hilde was good at concealing her emotions, so it was difficult to get a read on her. I didn’t think refusing her invitation

would cause trouble, but I wouldn't be able to focus on my work with a bad feeling nagging at me.

If it would clear my mind, I supposed I could have my meal together with them.

"Wait."

"Yes?" Hilde tilted her head, waiting for me to continue. Although she was the mother of a grown woman, there was still a slight girlishness to her behavior.

"Did you two already eat?"

"No, we were waiting for you to have your meal first," she answered.

"Then let's all eat together."

"Truly? My daughter will be delighted!" Hilde smiled lightly, putting her hands together.

She's acting so cutely...and defenselessly. Perhaps she only thinks of me as her daughter's husband and doesn't even see me as a man.

"The two of you are my mother-in-law and fiancée. Of course you are always welcome to eat with me."

"I shall tell Julianne. She kept saying that she was feeling lonely, so that should please her greatly."

That's it! That's the source of my bad feeling!

Julianne must have been on the verge of going berserk from being unable to see me. Lumié and Adele met me every day, and yet she was the only one who couldn't, hindered by her mother's lessons. It was even possible that she was under so much stress that she would just assault me in my sleep. My instincts must have noticed the danger I was in and had alerted me.

"I'm gonna wash up beforehand. I don't mind if you take your time, just prepare accordingly." Noblewomen took a long time to prepare, so it was important to show consideration.

I parted with Hilde and went into the bathroom. Counts and dukes might have had a servant to wash them, but I was a poor baron, so I had to clean myself. Thankfully, there existed a magic tool that worked like a faucet and pumped water directly from the well.

I filled a bucket and poured it on my head. The coldness of the water was perfect for my still-warm body. It blew away my exhaustion in an instant and cleared my mind. I washed my body and hair with soap, then rinsed myself.

I felt refreshed. If possible, I would have loved to soak in the bathtub, but making Hilde wait for too long would give a bad impression, so I gave up on it and moved to the dressing room.

As I was wiping myself with a towel, the door opened.

"I brought your change of clo..." started the apprentice maid before freezing at the sight of me naked. She flapped her mouth, blushing while holding my change of clothes, her eyes fixed on my crotch.

"Thanks." I took my clothes from her hands, and once I was done putting on my pants, I asked, "What's your name?"

"I-Ina. I have someone I promised to spend my future with in my village and—"

"I didn't ask about that."

"Thorry!" she chirped with a slight lisp, frightened by my harsh tone. The way she trembled like a small animal was pretty funny. That made me want to tease her more, but it would be bad if rumors spread that I laid my hand on a maid. I had to be careful not to stain House Girard's reputation now that it had finally gotten better.

"Next time, knock and wait for a reply. Got it?" I said to put an end to the discussion.

"Yes, siiir!" Ina answered miserably but didn't move.

I ignored her and finished putting on my clothes, then left her behind in the dressing room. I went up to the second floor and looked outside from the corridor. A little ways away, I could see the soldiers running on the practice ground of the barracks. They were all training without slacking off. As I watched them, wishing them to do their best, I calculated how much it would cost me if one of them died. The result depressed me—I really hoped they would all survive.

I continued on my way, walking slower than usual, until I finally arrived in front of the dining room. I opened the door and found

Julianne and Hilde already inside, sitting at the table. Lumié was also present, standing nearby and waiting to serve our food.

"Sorry for the wait," I said, entering the room.

Julianne and Hilde stood up and welcomed me.

I let out a small impressed sigh, surprised to see Julianne wearing a dress. It was dark purple and had a wide skirt adorned with a floral pattern along the hem. The collar of the dress went to the base of her neck, covering her scar, and a necklace hung over her chest. The pendant was a snake holding a jewel in its mouth, likely designed to complement my family crest. That way, even without her saying anything or wearing a ring, anyone would know which house she belonged to. Contrary to her usual clothes, which prioritized ease of movement due to her yearning to be a knight, her current attire didn't feel out of place to be presented as the wife of a noble.

"She could also use this dress for a soiree," Hilde explained.

"When was it made?" I asked.

"The production began the instant your betrothal was decided."

It was obvious from its quality that it hadn't been made in a day or two, but to think it had been prepared so far in advance! It must have cost quite a bit.

"You look great. If we get the chance to go to a party, you have to wear this dress." Not that anyone would invite me. Even more so considering the current situation with Baron Dulac.

"Thank you, Dear." Julianne put her hands to her cheek, embarrassed. Apparently, she had misunderstood my comment and thought I had praised her, not her dress. Not wanting to break the good mood, I didn't correct her.

"Let's eat." I had them sit, then went around the table and waited. Lumié silently pulled my chair out, and I sat down.

"I shall bring your meal," Lumié said. I nodded, and she left the room after a bow.

I knew I should be talking with them, but I kept quiet. Julianne, who was sitting in front of me, was muttering something, making it hard to speak to her.

"Don't make any noise; cut the meat into bite-sized pieces before

eating; be careful not to spill anything...” she mumbled. She was completely different from a moment ago when I had greeted her. Her eyes were hollow, as though she was being controlled, and Hilde was smiling next to her.

That was kind of eerie.

Even after our meal showed up, Julianne continued to be weird. She kept mumbling to herself as she took her fork and knife, bringing them to her plate. She carefully cut her steak, but a small *clink* sound resonated. Julianne twitched and slowly turned toward her mother.

“Be ready for more practice,” Hilde said.

“Mother...” Julianne’s face was filled with despair, and she looked on the verge of a mental breakdown from the harsh training.

I thought it was a good lesson for her—she was usually too energetic. *I won’t help, so make sure to get properly educated.*

I also cut my steak and threw it into my mouth. Salt was the only seasoning. I would have liked to add sauce and spices, but I could only import those from other domains at a hefty price.

It’ll have to wait until the end of my war with Baron Dulac, I thought as I filled my mouth with meat. Eating without respecting manners was the best seasoning. I enjoyed the sensation of the tender, juicy meat melting in my mouth as I shot Julianne a triumphant smile.

“This is unfair, Dear...” Julianne complained.

I’m the head of House Girard. I *make the rules. I can even eat with my hands if I want!* I extended my hand toward my plate, scoffing at Julianne.

“Master Jack,” Lumié coldly said from behind me. I turned back. Despite her smile, she was clearly angry. “As the head of House Girard, you must behave appropriately.”

“I would if guests were present, but we’re all part of House Girard here. It shouldn’t be an issue.”

“Yes, but...” Lumié’s expression darkened. “It would sadden me.”

Damn you! That’s a pretty unfair thing to say! If it had been an order, I would have ignored it, but I couldn’t complain about that. Disregarding her could be dangerous, as Lumié was one of the

characters who left Jack after running out of patience with him in the game.

I retracted my hand and continued to eat normally. For some reason, that made Julianne smile victoriously, but because of that she dropped the piece of meat she was going to eat. Hilde scolded her for it immediately.

It seemed the day Julianne would master proper manners was still far off.

* * *

The envoy I—Eric Dulac—had sent to the Girard barony returned to my domain far later than expected. The next due date for my debt repayment was nearing, so I had ordered him to return as quickly as possible, and yet he had wasted time. I wanted to hear what he had learned immediately, so I called the emissary to my office the instant he came back from the Girard territory.

"I have returned, sir!" The man stood in the center of the room after entering with a maid. His expression didn't seem apologetic in the least despite having stayed in the Girard barony longer than planned.

That greatly annoyed me. "What was Baron Girard's reply?" I asked.

"That there must be a misunderstanding, and that no bandit has fled to his domain. If possible, he would like to meet you, Baron Dulac."

Hmm, not a bad idea. I could bring my army with me to the Girard territory that way. "When could that be?"

"He is busy with his work, so he asked to wait at least a year."

"What?! And you just accepted that?!"

"Huh? Is there a problem...?"

"I'm asking if you tried to have this meeting sooner!"

"Perish the thought! A mere commoner like me would never dare give his opinion to a noble."

He hadn't even tried to negotiate! How could an envoy be so

incompetent?! It was a mistake to choose him just because he had been serving me for a long time.

"Then why did you stay there longer than planned?" I asked.

"Baron Girard needed to confer with his vassals, so I waited until they reached a decision."

"And you didn't find it odd that it took them *five* days just to reply that he wants to meet me in a year?!"

The envoy's face paled as he finally became aware of his mistake. Unfortunately for him, it was too late now. My demesne didn't need an incompetent who didn't understand his job and wasted my time.

"He said he wanted to carefully think about it because—"

"Shut up."

My irritation shot through the roof. I stood up from the sofa, strengthened myself with mana, and delivered a full-force kick to the man's stomach, channeling all of my anger into it. He vomited blood and almost crashed into the ceiling before falling to the floor, holding his stomach in agony.

I clicked my tongue. "So you're still alive, huh?" And here I had hoped that would kill him. He was tougher than I'd expected. He had impudently reinforced his body with mana to protect himself, not understanding that would only prolong his suffering. He truly was a fool.

Next, I decided to stomp his head and began to raise my leg.

"With all due respect, may I be allowed to speak?" said the maid who had been standing next to the door—Media. She had a large chest, and I liked that, despite her obedience, her gaze clearly showed that she hated me. Making women like that obey you was the best way to satisfy your desire for control.

It was rare for her to intervene, so that got me curious. "What?"

"If you kill Detlef here, it will stain the room. I suggest doing it outside instead."

...True enough. Yeah, killing him here would clear my anger, but I wouldn't want to dirty my carpet. I could have just had it changed before, but now I didn't have the money.

I had repaid the merchants I had owed by selling my furniture and the jewels in my treasury, but I was still indebted to Count

Belmond and the royal family. If I killed this man here, I would have to work in a room with a bloodied carpet until dealing with that horrid Girard brat. I'd hate that.

I calmed down and lowered my foot. "Throw him in the dungeon and have someone torture him. Be sure he regrets being born before he's killed!"

Media nodded and helped the man out of my office. She could have just dragged him by his leg, and yet she had been strangely gentle with him.

I went back to my chair—a cheap one I had bought recently—and sat down. It was so poorly made that it creaked and wobbled when I did so. My previous chair had been special, with a cushion made from monster hide, but I'd had to sell it to repay my debts. I had also fired most of my servants, so my mansion had become rather desolate.

Everything was the Girard brat's fault for not dying quickly. I would use the treasures of his domain—the ones the hero coveted—better than him, so he should just give everything to me already.

"The due date for Count Belmond's repayment is in half a year, and the royal family's is in seven months. Even if I obtained the Girard barony right now, it would take months for me to find the treasures. I can't waste time."

I had already taken extreme measures thus far, but perhaps I should go for something even more drastic. Count Belmond, who had cooperated until now, had stopped helping me for some reason, so now I had to handle everything by myself. The royal family had also ceased their support, but thanks to the kingdom's laws on wars between lords, I should still receive some backing. Same for the hero.

It wouldn't hurt to have another trump card, though. I would need to write a letter afterward.

"Detlef has been imprisoned." Media returned while I was thinking.

"Call my son," I ordered.

"Understood," she replied and left the room.

I took my glass pen, dipped it into ink, and began to write a

decree on a parchment. It was a command to scout and monitor the people Baron Girard had gathered to repair the bridge near my domain. At the end, I pressed House Dulac's seal to prove I was the one who had written it, then I rolled the parchment and fastened it with a string.

"You have called for me, Father?" asked a clear, masculine voice. I turned toward the office's entrance and found Matteo, clad in metal armor. His short hair, the scars on his face, and his muscular build clearly showed he was a warrior. He was a little too conceited, due to his youth, but he was strong. He was my prized son and the reason I had been able to demote Ser Yon and his endless lectures to a remote area.

"Read this." I gave Matteo the decree I had just written.

He read it and looked at me. "The true order isn't *just* to scout and monitor them, right?"

His perceptiveness cheered me up, and I reflexively grinned.

That's my son for you. I like smart people.

"Naturally. It's just a front."

The construction of the bridge had been approved by a past head of House Dulac, but it didn't benefit me. The Girard brat was likely to send soldiers to protect the carpenters repairing the bridge, and I would use that by saying he intended to invade my domain with them. I couldn't stop myself from grinning at my perfect plan!

"If they look like they're going to cross the river, arrest them for trespassing. If they resist, you can just kill them," I said.

A commoner who entered a fief without the permission of its lord was a criminal, so nobody could complain if they were killed. That was my right as the lord of this demesne. The captain of my soldiers should handle the order just fine.

"Are you sure about this?" Matteo asked. "If it goes badly, it might start a war with Baron Girard."

"It's too late to care about that. We've been provoking him expecting a war from the beginning."

"True enough." Matteo smiled. He had already known that; he'd only asked for show. It made things so much easier to have a son who understood your schemes.

"If nobody tries to cross the bridge, provoke them with arrows. If that's still not enough, then I give you permission to cross the river and attack."

No matter what the commoners said, I could just have testimonies forged later. Any evidence could be erased after slaughtering them all. The point was that the winner controlled the narrative. I could even ask for compensation if some of my soldiers were injured.

I won't give up until I obtain everything.

Chapter 3: Preliminary Skirmish

It had been a few days since I had sent Adele to guard the bridge as it was repaired. I planned to see how things were going tomorrow, so I was currently doing my best to finish the work in my office as fast as possible.

While the price of commodities continued to slowly increase, there still were a few peddlers coming to the Girard territory, so it shouldn't worsen too much. Still, I wanted to improve the situation, not just avoid making it worse, so I intended to gather capable merchants. In particular, I wanted to contact Heiner, the merchant I used the most in the game. Unfortunately, his whereabouts were still unknown. I knew he should be fleeing from the capital to the Girard territory right around now, though.

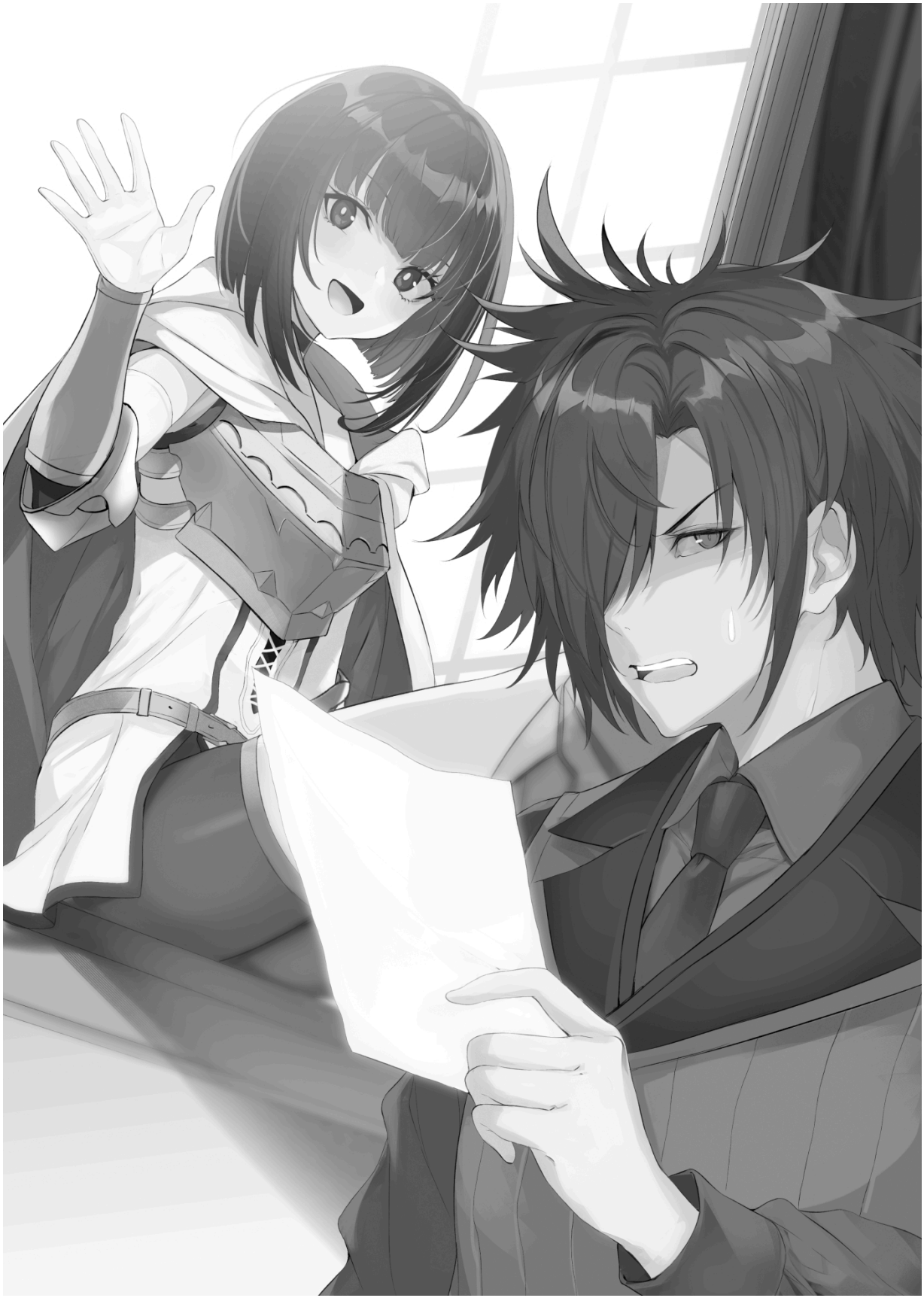
Oh well, I shouldn't be so impatient. I need to focus on what's in front of me first—dealing with Baron Dulac.

I picked up the letter I had received from Seravimia yesterday. I had placed it on my desk without reading it, so I opened it and checked its contents. It said that she consented to lend me the Verdant Wind sisters and that she would come greet me soon...?!

Suddenly, I felt wind from behind me. The window wouldn't just open on its own, and I didn't hear the sound of glass being broken, so someone must have opened it.

I quickly stood up and turned around with my hand on the Vampire Sword's hilt.

"Hi there. You look well," Seravimia said in greeting, waving her hand at me.



Seriously? I just read the damn letter!

Seravimia seemed to be in a great mood as she smiled my way. Maybe it was because we had been corresponding via letters, but she talked more casually than during our last meeting.

Still, I was a little conflicted and wasn't sure if I should be relieved that it hadn't been an assassin sent by Baron Dulac.

"That's trespassing, you know?" I said, my tone casual. It wasn't a formal setting, after all. And she was targeting my domain, so of course I wouldn't be cordial with her.

"I know. Are you going to chase me out?"

As if. Then you'd just attack head-on next.

This time we would be cooperating, however, so I didn't think she would do anything disadvantageous. I should listen to what she had to say.

"...So, why did you come?" I asked.

"If I said that I just felt the urge to see you, what would you say?"

"That I'm busy and you should leave." Why would I be happy to hear that from someone who wasn't my lover? Heck, I didn't even like her. I waved her away with my hand.

"How cold. I went to the trouble of coming all the way from the capital just to meet you."

"Is that really a good enough reason for the hero to come?"

"I snuck out, so I don't think anyone has noticed yet."

So you didn't even get permission! You shouldn't be here! Just be a good hero and stay in the capital!

"Anyway," Seravimia continued with a smile, slowly walking my way before stopping in front of me. I could see in her eyes that she was plotting something. "Do you want to know why I desire the Girard territory—no, *you*, Baron Girard—so much?"

"Oh? Do tell." I'd always wanted to know what happened after the ending of the game, so it was worth giving her some of my time. I didn't know why she had suddenly felt the need to speak, but if she was willing to share, then I wouldn't refuse.

"Did you know that *Survival Strategies of a Corrupt Aristocrat* has a sequel?" she asked.

What?! There wasn't one when I bought the game! What does that mean?!

"Judging by your reaction, I take it you didn't. I suppose that means we didn't die at the same time," Seravimia said.

I hadn't considered the possibility, but indeed, it was possible that Seravimia—who I thought to be the game's creator—and I had died at different times. Perhaps I'd died first but reincarnated after her. That would mean there was a temporal distortion, but considering we were currently experiencing the weird phenomenon of possessing the bodies of people from another world, I couldn't rule out the possibility.

"So that means the tomb of House Girard's founder appears in the sequel?" I asked.

"Oh? You've given up on hiding the existence of your past life?"

"Well, yeah."

Now that I knew there was a huge difference in our knowledge, there wasn't a point in hiding it. If anything, I should use the knowledge from my past life to hear more from Seravimia. In fact, she was likely so friendly with me because we both had past lives, so that approach should work.

"Good. I like how cooperative you're being. Your affection points just shot up, so I shall tell you some secrets."

It wasn't a bad thing that she held goodwill toward me, so to keep her in a good mood, I didn't interrupt and let her continue to talk.

"As for the answer to your question," she continued, "it's yes. After unifying the kingdom, the tomb of House Girard's founder is found while developing the Girard territory, starting an uproar. That's how the sequel begins."

"If that's just the beginning, then I guess there must be an even bigger discovery afterward." After all, discovering a tomb wasn't enough to make the entire plot of a game. There had to be something else.

"Exactly. Ancient ruins are hidden in the Girard territory."

"Is it like in these stories where there was a supercivilization in the past?"

"Yup, you got it. It's a classic trope, so I'm glad you know it. The ruins are well preserved, and many of their facilities are still usable. They're so valuable that the neighboring countries will wage war over them!" She dropped a bombshell, talking like a child showing off their favorite toy.

So the sequel included wars with other countries, huh? If just discovering the ancient ruins was enough to be attacked, then owning the land they were in was dangerous. But because Seravimia was targeting them, it would be difficult to conceal the ruins' existence for long.

"Does the royal family know about the ruins? What about other nobles?"

"I would never reveal such precious information to them. We're the only ones who know—it's our little secret!"

That didn't make me happy at all, but as long as she didn't reveal anything, war with other countries wasn't a pressing concern. Something else I needed to know was, however.

I lowered my stance, ready to unsheathe my sword, and asked, "If you want the ancient ruins in the Girard barony, wouldn't killing me be the easiest way to obtain them? Why don't you do that?"

Seravimia's smile widened. I didn't know what she was thinking, so I kept my eyes on her every movement as I waited for her answer.

"Because I need you, Baron Girard. Also, I don't want to kill you."

Seravimia had had several opportunities to kill me before, and yet she hadn't. And now, not only was she cooperating with me, she was also giving me intel without asking anything in return. So while she was definitely still hiding something, she was likely telling the truth about needing me and not wanting to kill me. At the very least, we were in a mutually beneficial situation.

"Then make sure I don't meet my downfall," I said.

"I don't mind, but in return, I want you to go look for the ancient ruins with me once we've dealt with Baron Dulac. I have a rough idea where they are, so it shouldn't take long."

Seravimia must be getting very impatient to create her perfect world, because the way she was negotiating was pretty crude. She

was clearly lacking composure. After all, even though she was the stronger one between us—both in authority and combat abilities—I was the one who held the advantage here. So naturally, I wasn't just going to accept her terms.

"I'm busy restoring my domain. Your offer is tempting, but I can't spare the money nor the manpower."

"I only need you, Baron Girard. Nobody else."

"What are you saying? The ruins are going to be full of traps. We need to be careful and form a proper exploration party."

I couldn't understand why she only needed me. It would make more sense if she had asked me to prepare scouts, luggage carriers, and guards.

Wait...just me? Could it be...? I remembered how I had obtained the Vampire Sword. Gwynt had tried to remove the lid of the tomb and failed, but it had opened the instant I had touched it. So maybe the ancient ruins were the same? Like, perhaps they had doors that could only be opened by Jack's bloodline? If so, the ruins were basically useless to anyone other than me, which meant I was in an even better position to negotiate.

"If you're that worried, I'll bring someone good at disarming traps. Just come with me," Seravimia said.

"Hard pass," I refused clearly. The air around Seravimia became heavier as she tried to threaten me by releasing her mana and strong bloodlust. "If you get even a single step closer, I'll never come with you."

"Then I just need to take you by force."

"Just go by yourself."

"No. It's useless without you."

She had quite the loose tongue. But thanks to that, I knew it wasn't using something like fingerprint recognition, which could be used even with a corpse. She needed me alive.

"If you come with me, you'll learn about the truth of this world," she continued. "Then you'll understand me!"

I could feel the urgency in her voice. She was being so earnest that I was at a loss for words for a moment. While I didn't know the details, apparently I would be able to understand Seravimia if I

learned the truth of this world. However, I didn't care about that. I just wanted to live luxuriously as a noble. I didn't even want to use her position as the hero.

In short, I didn't have a reason to accept.

"My answer won't change no matter what you say."

Seravimia stared at me silently, her eyes glistening. Was she on the verge of crying because I had refused? I just couldn't get a read on her. But because of the overwhelming power she wielded, sometimes she felt like a fearsome monster.

"...Fine. I'll step back for today." She waved her hand at me and put her foot on the windowsill.

"You're still going to send me help, right?" I asked.

"Of course. I could never turn down a request from you, Baron Girard," she replied. She shot one more glance at me, then jumped out of the window. We were on the second floor, but considering her physical abilities, there was no way she would get hurt.

I watched her run off of the premises, only relaxing once I couldn't see her anymore.

Next, I left my office. Having learned that my bloodline was important, there was something I quickly needed to do now. I had to take care of it before my fight with Baron Dulac.

I entered the room in the annex and stood before the bed where my parents were sleeping. The room had no furniture, as nobody came here besides Lumié, who wiped their bodies once every few days. No one should have noticed me entering here.

I placed my hand on my father's chest. It slowly moved up and down. He must have been in a sort of hibernation, considering he was still alive despite not having eaten for a long time. Surely, he would die from emaciation in half a year or so. Originally, I had planned to just wait for that to happen, which would then officially make me the only candidate to be the head of House Girard. However, my discussion with Seravimia changed everything. Now that I knew that Jack's bloodline was special and necessary to use the ancient ruins, it was risky to let my father live. After all, now that she had failed to convince me, it was possible that Seravimia would use him instead.

I couldn’t hesitate just because they were my parents—I had to kill them myself.

I unsheathed the Vampire Sword and moved the blade closer to my father’s neck. If I sucked his blood, he’d become even weaker, and it’d look like he’d died in his sleep.

I pushed the blade farther—

“Is there someone in there?” The door opened just before the blade touched my father’s neck. It was Lumié. “Master Jack...?”

Thankfully, she didn’t scream. However, she stared at me, her gaze asking for an explanation. I searched for an excuse, but I couldn’t find one. No matter how you looked at it, I had obviously been trying to kill my father.

I didn’t want Seravimia to know that I had tried to eliminate the other person with Girard blood, and I didn’t know when Lumié would betray me. In other words, there was only one thing to do: Kill her.

“Why are you here?” I asked, withdrawing the Vampire Sword from my father’s neck and turning toward Lumié. I slowly cycled my mana through my body, strengthening it. That way, I could finish her in an instant if I wished to.



“I came to wipe their bodies down.”

“I see.” I walked her way, the Vampire Sword pointed down.

Lumié sensed my bloodlust and swallowed. She looked very tense. “I saw nothing, Master Jack. I shall leave the room immediately, so...”

She was quick-witted and said the right thing. As if I would trust her.

I stopped in front of Lumié. I could easily kill her with the Vampire Sword from here.

“You didn’t see anything? Really?”

“If you do not believe me, then pierce my throat and sever my arms.” Lumié closed her eyes and stood defenselessly. I could feel she would accept anything I did. She didn’t recoil even after I placed the tip of my blade against her throat.

Impressed by her resolve, I released my bloodlust. Lumié betrayed Jack in the game, but the one before me was a living being, not a game character. Nothing was forcing her to act like she had in the game. At least, she should not betray me as long as I treated Ludwig with care.

I sheathed the Vampire Sword and clapped her on the shoulder. “I hoped my father would wake up if he felt his life threatened, but unfortunately it didn’t work.” I was obviously lying, and it was almost impossible that she would believe me. However, as long as the possibility that maybe I was telling the truth existed inside her, then that was enough for now. “Taking care of their bodies is important, but we need to think of a way to nourish them too.” I removed my hand from her shoulder. “Not a word to anyone. Got it?”

“Of course.”

“Then I leave them to you,” I said and exited the room.

Once I was back in the mansion, I leaned against a wall and exhaled a big sigh. It had been such bad timing. I hadn’t expected Lumié to show up right at that moment. The possibility of a rumor spreading that I was a cold-blooded man who killed his parents and would do the same to his retainers sent a chill down my spine. I would need to be more mindful of how I acted for a while.

As I walked through the courtyard, heading toward my office while thinking of other ways to kill my parents, I happened to see Kevin. Behind him were two elf women. I knew their faces from the game—the Verdant Wind sisters had arrived.

"Lady Seravimia has sent them as reinforcements." Kevin straightened his posture and handed me a letter.

I took it and checked its contents. It said to use the elf sisters to defend my domain.

"There's no doubt that these two are the Verdant Wind—Olivia and Lily. They'll help us against Baron Dulac. Treat them respectfully."

"Understood." Kevin stepped back.

Olivia, who had been silently listening until now, asked, "What should we do?"

Kevin frowned at how casual her tone had been, and was going to complain about it, but I stopped him with a glance. They were going to be my trump cards, so I didn't want some chiding to displease them. I could forgive a little rudeness. In fact, I should welcome them grandly to please them as much as possible.

"We wait for Baron Dulac to attack. We're going to have a small party tonight and—"

"Master Jack! Baron Dulac's men attacked!" a soldier in dirty clothes shouted, running our way.

Well, I guess the Verdant Wind's welcome will have to wait. Still, a lot sure is happening today.

"Explain the situation," I ordered.

"Y-Yes, sir!" the soldier—who had likely returned from the bridge to report to me—replied nervously. I didn't remember his face, so he must have been one of the new recruits. "Thirty soldiers with Baron Dulac's crest have gathered on the other side of the bridge! They shot arrows at us twice. Once in the morning, and once in the afternoon."

"Were there any casualties among the carpenters and our soldiers?" I asked.

"Lady Adele noticed them quickly and had everyone retreat, so nobody was hurt!"

Adele's command had successfully minimized the damage. I would have to praise her later.

"Good. Go back and tell them I'll be there right away!"

"Understood!"

I had told Adele not to do anything unless Baron Dulac's men crossed the river, so it should be fine, but no one could predict what would happen on the battlefield. I needed to go there and take command.

"Kevin. You go tell Ludwig to reinforce the town's defense and Gwynt to protect Hilde. Verdant Wind, you come with me!"

However, it would take time to make the necessary preparations and depart. Even more so considering it was already dusk. We would have to wait until tomorrow morning.

I could only pray that Adele and the rest wouldn't be attacked again before our arrival.

* * *

I—Adele—was protecting the bridge that was being repaired with the help of around ten of Master Jack's soldiers, who were keeping watch on our surroundings. There was currently no one on the opposite shore, but Baron Dulac's men had suddenly appeared and shot arrows at us yesterday, so we couldn't let our guards down.

If they crossed the river, I would definitely cut them to pieces. *I'll kill all the enemies who ravage Master Jack's territory!*

I took my eyes away from the river and looked behind me. Several tents had been pitched for the carpenters to sleep in, as they couldn't go back to town. Being attacked had greatly stressed them, and they had been drinking and making a racket since yesterday, which was rather unpleasant. They were starting to get more and more rowdy, and the soldiers couldn't do anything about it because they were busy keeping watch.

"Lady Adele. We have finished carrying the food," a soldier said, interrupting my thoughts. He'd brought a bespectacled merchant with him.

He gave me a parchment with the list of purchases—preserved

food, long-lasting vegetables, and alcohol. Honestly, I didn't know if the price was fair for this quantity, but considering it was below the budget Master Jack had given me, it should be fine.

"Did you check the packages?" I asked.

"Yes, ma'am!"

I gave him the parchment back and turned toward the merchant. "Thank you for your work. There don't seem to be any problems, so here is your money."

"Thank you very much."

With that, the discussion was over. I still wasn't comfortable around unfamiliar men, so I was going to go patrol the surroundings, but I noticed the merchant was still looking at me, wanting to say something. With no other choice, I stared back at him, waiting for him to talk.

"The repairs of the bridge should be done in a few days," he said. "This should make it easier to bring goods into the Girard territory."

"So what?" I didn't like how roundabout merchants were. I had been deceived several times because of that. If he was planning to steal Master Jack's precious money, then I would cut him down.

"To tell you the truth, I am hoping to start a business in the Girard domain once the bridge is repaired."

"And?" I tilted my head. He could do that by following the proper procedure. He didn't have to report anything to me. Just what was he thinking?

"It would really help me if you could tell Baron Girard about the Heiner Company..."

Why should I...? Wait. Didn't Master Jack worry about the lack of merchants? Maybe he would be happy to learn about this man?

I wasn't comfortable with men, but if it was for Master Jack, then I would do my best. I should be able to give him a proper reply.

"Got it. I will tell your name to Master Jack. So work hard."

"Of course! I shall do my very best!" He bowed deeply and headed toward the tents with the soldier.

Once they were out of sight, I went to the bridge. The repairs were almost done. In fact, if you didn't care about durability, it was already possible to cross it. I wanted to do one last check for

enemies before resting.

I closed my eyes and cupped my ears, focusing on sounds coming from the front. I heard the rustling of grass and leaves. It corresponded to when the wind blew, so nobody was hiding nearby.

However, as I was going to leave, thinking that our surroundings were safe, I heard something else. Whatever made the sound was about as heavy as a person, so it clearly wasn't a rabbit or another small animal. I opened my eyes and inspected the opposite shore but couldn't find anyone.

"They must be watching from afar."

They were likely going to sabotage the repairs during the night. I would need to double the number of night watches.

I went back to the tent and gave instructions to the soldiers, but nothing happened during the night, and we safely made it to the next morning. While I could feel the enemies' presence, they still didn't make a move even after noon passed, but we stayed on guard.

As the peaceful day ended and dusk arrived, the carpenters returned from their work. Then they immediately started to party noisily. They had accumulated a lot of stress because of the fear of being attacked once again, so they used alcohol to forget everything.

I was forced to stay to protect them, but I sat a little ways away from the tents to not be involved in the merrymaking as I ate some dried meat.

Until now, that had been enough to not be bothered, but tonight...

"Hey, missy. You trying to tempt me, huh?" A drunk carpenter found me and boldly stood before me. He must not have bathed in a while, because he stank of sweat and alcohol.

Having a smelly, high-handed man near me was very unpleasant, and I grimaced. *I hope he goes away soon.*

"You stink. Go away." I did a shooing gesture, pinching my nose.

Unfortunately, he didn't like that, and his face flushed in rage. "You little—! How dare you?!"

He took a step toward me, so I leaped backward from my sitting position. My hands reflexively moved to my twin swords, but I managed to stop myself. He wasn't a bandit, but a carpenter. Killing him would slow the repairs, which would go against Master Jack's wishes. As much as I hated it, I needed to settle things with words.

"I'm sorry if I offended you," I apologized.

"As long as you get it."

That improved his mood, and he stepped forward once again, so I also backstepped to keep the distance between us. There was his smell, of course, but I also didn't want to be near such a spiteful man. If I wasn't careful, I felt like I would just instinctively cut him down.

"Hey there, missy. Why are you moving back? Have some fun with me."

I was now certain of what he wanted. His vulgar grin reminded me of my swordsmanship instructor, and I shivered slightly.

"Why should I?" I replied.

The sun still hadn't set completely, and it was only a little dark as the drunkard kept following me. He should know that laying a hand on me would earn Master Jack's ire. He had to be so wasted that he couldn't even remember such a simple thing.

"It's been two weeks since I've last had a woman. I can't bear it anymore."

Then I'll kill you, I thought but didn't say aloud. After all, the carpenter could repair the bridge—he was far more important than me.

"I'll ask a soldier to guard you so you can go back to town. But once you're satisfied, you must return."

"That won't do! I need to do it now!" He grabbed my shoulder. He reeked so much of alcohol that it made me dizzy.

Would Master Jack forgive me if I did an arm throw? Or should I push him away and take some distance? Just what should I do...?

"Hey, what are you doing?" a masculine voice called out. It wasn't one of the soldiers I had trained, however, but another carpenter. He seemed to be in a better state than the drunk one, so maybe he was trying to help me. Yes, that had to be it. After all, you wouldn't allow

someone to do something as stupid as laying a hand on the person protecting you.

"She's the only woman here. Then there's only one thing to do, eh?" the drunkard said.

"...Yeah," the other carpenter agreed with a vulgar grin.

They're the worst. All the men besides Master Jack should just die.

The situation reminded me of my master and the other disciples. My body tensed, and my movement dulled. I wished I could have just lost myself to my rage like with the bandits, but I couldn't attack Master Jack's precious workers.

The second man grabbed my other shoulder. Why were the people I was trying to protect making a move on me? That didn't make sense. Fear took hold of me, and I fell on my rear as my knees buckled.

"Let's take her somewhere else."

"Yeah. Can't wait to have some fun!"

One took my arms, and the other grabbed my ankles to carry me.

Master Jack... I closed my eyes in despair.

"Bwah!" I heard a strange voice, and my legs were freed.

"You— Gah!" went another weird voice, and this time it was my arms.

I gingerly opened my eyes and saw Master Jack with the setting sun behind me. He had come just when I had hoped for him to save me!

"You scum. What were you going to do to my Adele?" he asked.

His expression was even more wicked than usual, which was very cool— No, this wasn't the time for that! Why did he save me and hurt his precious workers? I really wanted to ask, but the mood didn't seem right.

Master Jack unsheathed his Vampire Sword and approached the collapsed carpenters.

"Are you all right, Miss Adele?" someone called out from behind, and I turned toward him. One of the soldiers Master Jack had brought with him put a knee on the ground and looked at me, worried.

"Yes. Why is Master Jack here?"

"He rushed over after hearing about the enemy attack."

It seemed the new recruit I had sent as a messenger had diligently accomplished his task.

"Answer already! You're wasting my time!" Master Jack shouted, kicking the collapsed men. They flew away and rolled on the ground for a few meters before stopping, coughing blood.

"What's happenin'?!" The foreman came over, hearing the turmoil, and stood before Master Jack with the other carpenters. He didn't flinch, even though he was facing a noble.

The other carpenters were drunk and looked ready to throw their fists.

I have to protect Master Jack! I thought and tried to get up, but the soldier next to me stopped me.

"Let's just observe for now."

I was going to protest but noticed other soldiers gathering around Master Jack, aggravating the situation.

"You act boldly for someone unable to keep his men in line," Master Jack said.

"What? Even if yer a noble, I'm not gonna back down after hearin' that." The foreman stepped forward only to be blown away by Master Jack's punch. He clearly didn't care that the foreman was backed by the Carpenter Guild.

You're so cool, Master Jack!

"Shut up." Master Jack pointed his Vampire Sword at the carpenters, stopping them from moving, and continued. "I'm punishing them for trying to lay a hand on my vassal."

"What?" The foreman stroked his bruised cheek and looked at the collapsed men in shock. Then he sighed, understanding what had happened. Even though he was calming down, though, the soldiers got angrier instead.

"Those scoundrels tried to make a move on Miss Adele...?" someone muttered.

The next instant, all the soldiers unsheathed their weapons. It seemed they were angry on my behalf, but I couldn't understand why. How puzzling.

The carpenters stood ready to defend themselves, but they looked pale. Even drunk, they were aware that they were at a disadvantage.

"Sorry. My boys were in the wrong." The foreman apologized with a bow, but that didn't defuse the situation.

"That's all?" Master Jack asked.

"I'll scold them and make them leave. If we can settle this with money, then I'll sell them as slaves to pay ya. So please don't kill them."

"I get that you want to protect your men, but that won't change my decision. I'm gonna kill them right here, right now."

The soldiers nodded, agreeing with Master Jack. On the other hand, the carpenters only looked at their foreman without protesting.

"...Then I'll respect yer judgment, Baron Girard."

"Good call." Master Jack smiled wickedly and stabbed the collapsed men with his Vampire Sword. The blade sucked their blood, transforming them into mummies. The carpenters and soldiers all grimaced in shock at the creepy corpses. "If you don't want to end up like this, then do your jobs properly."

Master Jack sheathed his Vampire Sword, then came over to me and lifted me into his arms.

"Sorry for being late," Master Jack whispered with a grim expression once we were away from the crowd. I didn't know what to say and could only silently admire his wonderful profile.

* * *

When I arrived at the campground with the Verdant Wind sisters, carpenters were making a move on Adele, so I immediately went to save her and took her away in my arms.

Her ears were flattened and her tail rounded. I had thought that she had conquered her past, considering how she had been able to mingle with the soldiers, but I had been wrong. In combat, she was brave and didn't care about her opponents' genders, freely swinging her twin blades, but being seen sexually by an ally had revived her

fears.

To think that having a man's lust directly thrust at her was enough to trigger her trauma and leave her so vulnerable and weak. She's always clinging to me, so I'd never have noticed.

No one could replace Adele, so if this worsened her trauma and made her unable to stand on the battlefield, then everyone here would have to pay for it with their lives.

I'll suck all of their blood— Oops, the Vampire Sword must have taken me over a bit. I had just sucked some blood, so that must have increased its influence on me. Or maybe it was because I had lost my calm, which had created an opportunity for it.

"I am sorry. I troubled you because of my weakness..." Adele apologized. Because nobody had ever recognized her worth before me, she had pretty poor self-esteem. I had thought that she was getting better and had gained some confidence, but people couldn't change that easily.

The only way to do something about it was for me to continuously show her that I recognized her strength.

"I've never considered you to be troublesome. I'm always relying on you as my swordsmanship instructor and as a guard," I said kindly to make her ready to stand on the battlefield once again.

"That cannot be true. After all, look at how weak I am..."

She was being even more negative than when we had met. Apparently, words weren't going to be enough. With the coming war against Baron Dulac, I absolutely had to restore her confidence.

"Let's go somewhere where we can be alone." I didn't wait for a reply and walked away, still carrying Adele in my arms.

Thanks to my planting fear in everyone's hearts earlier, they all moved away as I approached. I purposefully advanced slowly to show them who their lord was until I reached my tent, freeing us from their gazes.

I softly sat Adele on the bed, treating her like a fragile item. Then I crouched for us to be at eye level and leaned closer.

"Nobody would think you're weak. You're stronger than knights and can easily defeat bandits."

"But I could not do anything against mere carpenters..."

"Still, I don't think you're weak."

"Why...?"

"Because I know your strength, Adele." I grabbed her shoulders to prevent her from moving. "You're the only one I can feel safe around, and the only one who can be my emotional support on the battlefield."

"What if I freeze like I did earlier?"

"You're not fighting alone. If it happens again, then I'll help you."

"Then does that not mean I am troubling you in the end?"

"You've saved me several times. I'm just balancing the scales."

"Huh? I have saved you?"

"Did you forget our battle against the lesser earth dragon? You risked your life to protect me."

"Ah, yes, that did happen." Finally, Adele smiled faintly.

I should be able to bring back her confidence by continuing to remind her of her accomplishments like this.

"The soldiers you've trained will be useful against Baron Dulac, and you've killed bandits, defending the peace of my demesne. See? You're helping with my work as the lord of this land."

"Do you truly think so...?"

"Of course," I replied instantly. Showing the slightest hesitation would make her think I was lying.

"Then I can stay with you?"

Ah, so that's why she's feeling down. Adele had thought that without being able to fight, she was useless and wasn't worthy of being by my side. Showering her with kind words had worked, and I finally got to hear her true thoughts. *Come on, just how low is your self-esteem? You need to see things more objectively.*

"You bet you can. In fact, I'm never letting you go, no matter what." I slid my hands down behind Adele's back and gently embraced her.

"Ah..."

I had thought that she might resist because of her trauma, but she didn't. That proved how special I was to her, which relieved me.

"I'll help you train to handle drunkards. Then you'll be unbeatable."

"Yes... I shall do my best for you, Master Jack." Her reply was tearful, so you couldn't truly say I had cheered her up, but there was strength in her voice.

I almost felt like thanking the drunkards for giving me the opportunity to learn about Adele's weakness.

I hugged her for about ten seconds before letting go. "Wait here."

Things were getting noisy outside, so I left Adele inside the tent and went to check it out. My soldiers were fistfighting with the carpenters, doing whatever they wanted just because I hadn't given any orders.

"We'll make you pay for laying a hand on Miss Adele!"

"It stopped at an attempt! And yet, two of our friends were killed! That's unfair!"

For an instant, I thought about just purging everyone, but what little reason was left inside me muttered that it would just greatly diminish my manpower, so I shouldn't do that. With no other choice, I decided to go with the peaceful method first.

"Shadow Bind."

The people's shadows, created by the setting sun, sprouted from the ground and restrained their owners' limbs. Now unable to move, everyone understood something was happening, and they turned toward me. I was releasing quite a lot of bloodlust with my mana, so they had to think I was really going to kill them all. Nobody tried to resist, too scared that I would suck their blood if they did. Considering they had obediently yielded, I would forgive them this time.

"I'm in a bad mood," I said.

Whether it was the carpenters, who thought the punishment had been too heavy for a failed attempt, or the soldiers, who were fighting with their allies even though Baron Dulac's men could attack at any moment, they were all fools.

I was pissed off.

I drew the Vampire Sword. It almost overwhelmed my mind with the desire to kill, but my rage at Adele's assault pushed it back.

Back down and obey me, I ordered it, and it easily gave up. If only the idiots before me were as obedient.

“I’m sure you know why, right?” I strode toward the foreman and stopped before him, placing the Vampire Sword’s blade against his neck. “Isn’t your job to keep the carpenters in line? Am I wrong?”

“No... It’s as you say, my lord...”

“Then why are they fighting with my soldiers?”

“Well, um...”

“Not that I intend to hear your excuses.” I pushed the blade just enough to cut a few millimeters into the foreman’s neck. That made him bleed, but the sword immediately sucked the blood, which frightened him and the other people looking at us. “They tried to make a move on a woman important to me. Killing them was a suitable punishment, don’t you think?”

“O-Of course.”

“Then there’s nothing to complain about. If you cause another uproar, I’ll suck the blood of all the workers. Don’t think you’ll have a decent death.”

The carpenters paled when I looked at them. None of them talked back, and they all had stiff smiles painted on their faces, which irritated me. I considered killing them all for a moment, but I stopped myself. Moving based on your feelings felt good, but then my rule would become one of terror. It would work for a while, but the people would revolt the instant I showed weakness, leading to my downfall. My objective was to live a pleasant, luxurious life, so I needed to see things in the long term and make some compromises.

I exhaled a deep sigh and released the carpenters from their shadows. “Go back to your tents and sleep,” I ordered.

The carpenters quickly scattered in all directions like baby spiders. That should be enough fear to restrain them. At least, they shouldn’t cause any more problems until the repairs were done. However, if they ever showed any rebellious intent, then I’d answer with violence, starting with severing the foreman’s head as an example.

“Now it’s your turn,” I said, turning toward the soldiers.

Because of what the carpenters had done to Adele, the men had been seething with anger, but now they were regretting provoking my wrath. It was too late, however. Ludwig would have realized the

consequences earlier.

"As your heads seem to be completely empty and unable to retain anything, I shall generously remind you of your duty."

I heard them gasp. In this world, where nobles had more mana than commoners, the difference in power between status was immense. So naturally, the soldiers, being plebeians, were utterly terrified.

"Your job is to protect the bridge even if it costs you your lives. I didn't use my precious money to dispatch you here just so that you could fight with the people of my fief." I walked over to the closest soldier and leaned my face toward his. "Got it?"

"Yes...sir."

"I didn't hear you!"

"YES, SIR!"

I stepped away from him and walked over to another soldier.

"So, what were you doing earlier?"

"Fighting with the workers, sir."

"Exactly." I slowly walked over to yet another soldier. "And you think you were right to do so?"

"No, we were not, sir!"

"So you do get it, huh? Indeed, you're all in the wrong!" I tightened their restraints to the point it would leave marks on their limbs. The soldiers groaned in pain, barely able to breathe. "This is your punishment for not obeying my orders. Now, listen while you suffer."

I wasted as much time as possible, leisurely walking to a spot where all the soldiers would be able to see me. Not a single one of them was looking at me resentfully. Adele must have drilled into them not to go against me.

"You'll divide into two groups and take turns to keep watch over the bridge at night. You can group with whoever you want, but know this—if you make a mistake, it'll reflect badly on Adele. So give it your all."

I dispelled my magic and the soldiers collapsed to the ground. None of them stood up, unable to move from the pain.

Watching suffering men wasn't my thing, so I turned back and

headed toward my tent.

"Please...wait... Let...us...meet...Miss...Adele..." said one of the soldiers.

I halted and turned his way. "Why?"

"To...apologize...for not...being able...to protect her..."

What a load of bullshit. If they really thought about her, then they wouldn't try apologizing—they would redouble their efforts to prove that her training was effective. They only wanted to apologize to escape their feelings of guilt.

It reminded me of my past life, when my ex-wife had confessed about her affair—which extremely annoyed me. She'd been the only one who found any relief from that confession. And the same would happen if they apologized to Adele.

Damn them, making me remember such awful memories.

"You don't have the right," I said coldly. There was no need to be gentle with unrepentant soldiers.

I resumed my walk and returned to my tent. Adele was in the same position I had left her, likely still thinking about when she had been assaulted. She wasn't a game character, acting as she had been programmed, but a flesh and blood human—I needed to take care of her.

"You'll be safe here. Want to sleep together?" I suggested, as she often snuck into my bed in the mansion.

"You do not mind?" Adele asked, looking glad.

Just as planned. As I thought, I'm special to her. That confirms she'll never betray me. If I ever found myself with only one person I could rely on, then it would be her.

"Of course." I consciously smiled.

I changed into my nightwear and we went into bed. Adele silently hugged me from behind, her face buried into my back as she sniffed me. She was likely trying to forget all the bad stuff. I usually pushed her away when she did that, but tonight I decided to let her sniff me as much as she wanted, hoping that would help her get better faster.

I felt something move and slowly opened my eyes. I was greeted

by Adele's sleeping face.

Ah, yeah, we slept together.

She was sound asleep, her breathing calm. She likely wasn't going to wake up for a while. I had feared that she might have nightmares, but that thankfully hadn't happened.

I quietly got out of bed and changed while watching Adele.

Yesterday, I had acted out of sorts, so I had likely earned the soldiers' resentment. While my domain was in a far better state than before, the people were still living a difficult life, and it was possible a revolt would occur. I had to make the soldiers my allies if I didn't want to meet my downfall in such a case.

"Still, I just couldn't contain myself." It was only after voicing it that I realized the truth of it—even though it should only have been a relationship based on self-interest, I wanted to protect Adele even if that meant taking a risk. At first, she had only been a comrade I needed to defend myself, but now she was more than that—I had become attached to her. It seemed that despite my wife betraying me in my past life, I still wanted to believe in people. "How foolish."

To stop thinking about it, I started to count the number of stains on the tent's fabric while I put on my protective gear. Just after I fastened my breastplate and dangled the Vampire Sword at my hip, I heard shouting outside.

"Retreat!"

"Ow! My leg!"

"Don't counterattack until they've come to our side!"

Apparently, Baron Dulac's soldiers were attacking us. I headed toward my tent's exit to check the situation outside.

"Is it morning already?" Adele woke up, rubbing her eyes. She was still half-asleep, though, as she had yet to notice we were under attack.

"The enemy's here. I'm heading out, what about you?"

Adele's ears stood up when she heard me, then twitched a few times—likely because she was trying to listen to what was happening outside.

"I am coming with you! I shall guard you with all I have!" She leaped out of bed and fixed the Twin Hydra Blades to her hips. It

didn’t even take thirty seconds for her to prepare. She wasn’t wearing any protective gear, but considering how strong she was, she should be fine.

Worst case, I’ll help her—or rather, if I have the leeway, I guess I can help her if needed. After all, losing my excellent guard would pose issues.

“Let’s go,” I said, and I raised the cloth of the tent’s exit.

The carpenters were scrambling in panic and heading toward the center of the campground, where two of my soldiers were protecting the noncombatants. The rest were defending the bridge, keeping watch on Baron Dulac’s men. The enemy still hadn’t invaded our side, so things weren’t as urgent as I had thought.

“Is it fine for you to be here, Miss Adele?” asked a man carrying a big rucksack on his back. He wore glasses, which was pretty rare in this world. They were apparently a magic item, as the temple parts each had three minuscule magic stones embedded into them.

I recognized that man, but I never expected to meet him here.

“Who are you?” I knew him from the game, but we had never met, so I needed to ask his name.

“You are...” He looked at me, surprised. As expected of a talented merchant, he immediately realized who I was. He had an eye for people. “It is a pleasure to meet you, Baron Girard. I am Heiner, the one who has sold and carried the food provided to this camp.”

“Oh, you’re a merchant. Adele has been in your care, then.”

Heiner was a character who despised dishonest business practices and was honest to a fault—which ultimately worked against him, as he was forced to come to the Girard territory. In the game, he ran a small shop that sold a limited amount of rare goods.

“She has been the one taking care of me. I have earned a fair bit of coin from all the food she has purchased, after all.”

“Good for you,” I replied. “Merchants are welcome in my demesne. How about it? Want to open a shop in this land?”

“It would be a dream come true. I need to save funds and find some articles to sell, however.”

He skillfully deflected my proposal, but letting go of prey was against my principles. I would definitely have him start a business in

my domain.

"Then once you're ready, contact me. I'll help you."

"You will...?" Heiner grew suspicious. After all, it was strange for a noble to offer his help to a mere merchant. He was still smiling, but he must have been pretty unsettled inside.

"It's a little shameful to admit, but my domain is lacking in merchants and the distribution of goods is stalling. That's why I'm trying to directly invite talented individuals such as yourself."

Unfortunately, my explanation didn't clear his doubts. Using my position as an aristocrat and acting high-handedly would only make him leave, so I decided to withdraw and wait for now.

"I'm not forcing you. But if you ever feel like it, send me a letter," I said, putting an end to our conversation.

Well then, guess it's time to see how things are going.

I turned my back to Heiner and went over near the bridge with Adele. Soldiers were glaring at each other from opposite sides of the river. About ten of Baron Dulac's men were on the other shore, shooting arrows this way. Considering their small number, they weren't seriously attacking us.

Meanwhile, the five soldiers on this side weren't counterattacking. Thanks to my harsh scolding yesterday, they were obediently following my orders.

"How many times have we been attacked so far?" I asked.

"Three times. They have only been shooting arrows at us, so we have stayed on the defensive," Adele answered. Her eyes were sharp and focused, proving she wasn't dwelling on yesterday's events. Taking care of her mental health had paid off.

"Say, what should we do?" said a sudden voice. I turned toward it and found Lily accompanied by her sister, Olivia. We had slept in different tents, but they must have sensed the start of the battle. I was glad that they were so proactive, but it wasn't their turn to act yet.

"You're my trump cards. I want to keep you a secret for now. This will just be a small skirmish, so you should stand by a little ways away and watch."

"Gotcha." They didn't have any objections, and Lily waved her

hand at us before leaving with her sister.

Now alone with Adele, I folded my arms and observed our enemies. All they did was shoot arrows at us, and they didn't try to come to this side.

"Look! It's Baron Girard! Aim at him!"

Arrows flew my way, but Adele repelled them with her Twin Hydra Blades. No matter how many times they tried, the perfect, invincible, and adora...guard by my side protected me, so I wasn't in any danger. Still, it was annoying.

"Should be fine to interfere as long as they don't notice," I muttered. They were getting carried away because we weren't counterattacking and were standing at the edge of the shore. They were so focused on shooting arrows at us that a slight push in the back would easily knock them into the river.

"You are looking evil," Adele pointed out. I must have unconsciously expressed my thoughts on my face.

"Do you dislike it?"

"No. You look fantastic," Adele honestly praised my evil-scheming face. It appeared that because of yesterday's matter, she adored me even more now. I'd never want to offer my everything to someone, but it felt good to have someone do it to me.

"Time for a little trick." I slowly released the mana in my mana-storing organs, carefully manipulating it so that it wouldn't leak out, then whispered, *"Shadow Sleep."*

I activated my sleeping spell, restraining its power as much as possible. At full strength, it would force the target into a deep slumber, but here it would only make them lose consciousness for a few seconds, which was plenty enough for my plan.

"Whoaaa!" Two soldiers slipped off into the river. The current wasn't fast, and the river was only two meters deep, but that didn't matter. Not only were they totally soaked, but their leather armor, knives, and swords weighed them down and made them sink.

"Rescue them!" yelled the man who appeared to be their leader, and the other soldiers went to the edge of the shore and threw a rope into the river.

You idiots. Can't you learn?

"Shadow Sleep." I used my spell on the foremost man holding the rope, and he also slipped off into the river.

"Another one fell!"

"What's happening?!"

Nobody had noticed my use of magic, and it looked just like they were risking their lives to do a comedy sketch. I couldn't stop myself from laughing.

"You are amazing, Master Jack!" Adele praised me again, her eyes sparkling.

It feels so good! What a perfect plan!

"Hey, look at those fools just tumbling into the water!" I jeered and cackled. My soldiers quickly followed suit.

The enemies flushed red with rage, but they were too busy rescuing their comrades to counter, so I used the opportunity to provoke them even more.

"It seems Baron Dulac's weaklings aren't even capable of standing on their own! Maybe I'll notify him that his fool soldiers drowned while missing all their shots to boot! I'll even send condolence money as thanks for the spectacle!" I shouted, sneering at them.

One of the soldiers let go of the rope and glared my way. He had a long, slender tail, so he was likely a beastfolk like Adele. Probably a feline.

"Halt!" The leader tried to stop him, but the beastfolk soldier couldn't contain his rage.

"You bastard! I'm gonna kill you!" He did an approach run and leaped over the river, landing on our side. Beastfolk really had impressive physical abilities. "Die!" he shouted, drawing his sword.

He got carried away and forgot something—he was now in the Girard territory. And I never gave him my permission, so that was trespassing—which meant nobody would complain if he died for it.

"Do it," I said.

Adele, who had released her mana, ran from my side toward the beastfolk man. She was so fast that I could hardly follow her, and before I even noticed, the man's head had been severed and rolled on the ground. He likely hadn't even realized he had died.

As everyone froze and looked at the corpse, I leisurely walked over to it, picked up the head, then threw it at the enemy commander.

"One of Baron Dulac's soldiers has invaded my demesne! I hereby deem you to be my enemies!" I declared. Now that I had a good pretext, all that was left was to thoroughly defeat them.

Perhaps they couldn't catch up to the sudden change of situation, as Baron Dulac's men weren't reacting.

Man, what a bunch of weaklings.

"Prepare to counterattack!" I shouted. My soldiers immediately readied their bows. Their movements had been smooth, showing the effectiveness of Adele's training. "I shall wait ten seconds. If you haven't retreated by the end of my countdown, we'll attack to protect my domain."

I didn't wait for a reply and started my countdown.

"Seven... Six... Five..."

Baron Dulac's men finally reacted. The ones holding the rope let it go, abandoning the men who had fallen into the river.

"Three... Two..."

They ignored their leader's command and fled.

"One... Zero."

The only one left was the commander.

"Shoot," I ordered, and my soldiers obeyed.

The enemy leader repelled the arrows with his sword, but because of that he failed to parry the knife thrown by Adele, which stabbed him in the neck. He held his hand to his injury before toppling over backward—dead.

"The battle is over! Go treat the wounded, if there are any!" I instructed, then I went to the riverside. On the opposite shore was the leader's corpse, and the bodies of a few of Baron Dulac's soldiers were floating on the river.

That was it. Now war with another noble was imminent. I had been prepared for it, but now that it was happening, I couldn't help but feel a slight urge to run away.

"What should we do now, Master Jack?" Adele asked.

"We should go back to the tents and check the damage." The

soldiers weren't my only concern—I had to confirm whether any of the carpenters had been hurt too. If not, then I would have them resume the repairs immediately. "Let's go."

I went back to the campground with Adele. At the center were the carpenters, Heiner, and the children who had been gathered to take care of cooking and cleaning. The soldiers who had returned before me must have told them the battle was over, because they all looked relieved. They were even pleasantly chatting, and nobody seemed to have been more than slightly injured.

Good, that means we can resume the repairs immediately.

"Looks like you're having fun. Do you think you're on a vacation?" As soon as they heard me, all the carpenters turned my way and tensed up.

The foreman became flustered and hastily shouted, "Get back to work, y'all!"

The carpenters scattered like baby spiders once more. While they acted before I'd ordered them to, that wouldn't improve my opinion of them. They should just be glad that I hadn't killed them and work themselves to the bone.

Talking to the foreman would only irritate me further, so I just shot him a glare and went to the soldiers' tents. I found a soldier checking the damage to his protective gear.

"Any casualties?" I asked.

He immediately stood up. "Only one, sir. He was shot in the thigh. He will need to rest for a while, but he should be able to continue his work as a soldier," he answered nervously. Educating them had paid off.

I wished I could be relieved that there had been no deaths, but it would only get worse from here on out. Each time one of my men died, I would need to provide condolence money, which would melt my funds. I wanted to minimize the damage as much as possible, but that was going to be difficult.

"Go ask Heiner to send the injured man back to the barracks." If he couldn't move, then I would have him transported by carriage. Heiner should have been planning to go to town anyway, so he should accept as long as I paid him.

"Understood." The soldier saluted with a hand on his chest.

I threw a bag of silver coins at him, and though flustered, he managed to catch it.

"This is the transport fee. Give it to Heiner. If he says that's too much, then tell him to give me a discount the next time I buy something from him." A normal merchant would never do that, but Heiner was honest to a fault. That should make him think I trusted him as a merchant, which should motivate him. "Also, I'll write a letter, so give it to the injured soldier and have him pass it to Ludwig."

The letter would be a decree requesting both reinforcements and Ludwig to come take command. Even if Baron Dulac were planning to attack us again, it would take time for him to prepare, so I would use the opportunity to infiltrate his domain. I didn't intend to actually do anything, however. I would only check the enemy's preparations and return right away.

Chapter 4: Infiltrating the Enemy

Two days later, Ludwig arrived with five soldiers. With this, the bridge would have almost twenty soldiers protecting it. While it wasn't enough to defend against all of Baron Dulac's men, I'd also have the Verdant Wind sisters help them during my absence, so it should be fine.

I told Ludwig to maintain the order, then handed him the command of the site. If a problem occurred before I returned, then I'd need to punish a few people as an example.

I hope you won't make me do that, Ludwig.

Now I was free to move as I wished. Adele and I changed into adventurer-like clothes and infiltrated the Dulac barony.

We were each on a horse with nobody else around. The weather was great, allowing us to look far away into the horizon. So far, the scenery was the same grassy field as the Girard territory, which was pretty boring, but after continuing to walk along the road for a while, we noticed a figure far away.

"Bandits?" Adele guessed.

"No, I only see one person, so I don't think so. Stay alert," I replied. Even a bandit wouldn't be dumb enough to attack armed people who didn't even have cargo, so it had to be an adventurer or someone who lived nearby.

We vigilantly advanced, and eventually the figure became clear. The tension immediately drained away from me as I watched the hero—Seravimia—wave at me with a smile.

"Why are you here?" I asked.

"I thought I would watch your fight with Baron Dulac," she answered, hiding a smile with her hand.

I never was able to get a read on her, but considering she had sent the Verdant Wind sisters as promised, it should be fine to not

count her as an enemy.

"You can relax, Adele. Just this time, Seravimia is our ally." However, maybe because she was displeased, Adele didn't reply and only looked at me. Considering our first meeting with Seravimia, I could understand her dissatisfaction, but having the hero on our side while in enemy territory was really helpful. She was worth using. "You can't obey my order?"

"Of course I can!"

"Then you don't need to be so on guard against an ally."

"...Understood." Adele's ears drooped, her expression dejected.

Was I too harsh? It's hard to find the right balance.

"If you want to come with us, I'll permit it. So what do you plan to do?" I asked Seravimia.

"I'm coming with you, naturally." She lightly jumped and landed on my horse behind me. There had been no impact as she sat, as though a feather had dropped on the horse's back. "Does that count as a date?"

"Of course not. Now shut up." I kicked my horse's belly to make it run, and a dissatisfied Adele followed behind us as we headed toward the town Baron Dulac resided in.

"It's surprisingly plain," I commented as we walked through the town after leaving the horses at a stable.

Unexpectedly, the Dulac barony wasn't that different from the Girard territory. The town was rather small, and at first glance, the buildings, the population, and the goods were mostly the same as in my domain. If I had to point out the biggest difference, it would be that the people in the street looked pretty gloomy, likely because of the recent tax increase that made their lives harder. Baron Dulac's debts were now an open secret, so if things continued like this, it was probably only a matter of time before the people revolted.

"A typical rural barony. There's nothing interesting," Seravimia complained, bored. At first, I had feared someone would recognize her if she didn't hide her face—but thinking about it, there was no way commoners would know what the hero looked like, so it wasn't a problem.

“Then you shouldn’t have followed us,” I retorted.

“You’re so cold.” Seravimia approached me with a smile, but Adele interposed herself, glaring at her. “I don’t plan to harm him, so you don’t need to be so cautious. Didn’t Baron Girard say so?”

“I just do not want you near him.”

“Hmm... Looks like she’s pretty attached to you, huh?” Seravimia said, displeased. Her eyes had even sharpened for an instant. She must be annoyed that I had stolen Adele, the strongest character, from her.

Maybe you hoped to make Adele your subordinate, but that future will never happen. Just give up.

I ignored her and went to a stall nearby. It was selling fruit, but everything was twice the market price. Curious, I decided to ask the middle-aged woman who ran it.

“Aren’t these too expensive?”

“It’s the same everywhere. If you think I’m lying, just go look at the other stalls.” She must have said that several times already, because you could hear how fed up she was in her tone.

I wanted to know more, so I handed her three silver coins. She understood my intention and grinned.

“Is it only the fruit?”

“No, all the prices in the territory have increased.”

“Everything?”

“Yes.”

“Wouldn’t that make it hard to live here?”

“So much so that some families have sold their children into slavery. Good grief, just what is the lord thinking?” The middle-aged woman sighed deeply; then, after glancing around, she beckoned me closer with her hand. I understood she wanted to tell me a secret, so I leaned in. “There’s a rumor that he’s using the money from the increased taxes to buy food for a war. You’re adventurers, right? Then you should leave quickly if you don’t want to be dragged into it,” she whispered.

Baron Dulac’s personality was the worst, but his people were decent.

“Thank you for the advice.”

"You paid for it, so no need to thank me." She smiled, making a circle with her thumb and index finger. What a strong-willed woman.

I took a small fruit, threw it into my mouth, then handed her another silver coin before leaving.

I talked to the other two while we walked. "I just confirmed that Baron Dulac has finished buying food, so his preparations for the war must be almost done. We're going to his barracks to check what the soldiers are doing next."

If Baron Dulac had bought food for his troops, then his preparations were likely in their final stage. In fact, it was because he was almost ready that he had meddled with the bridge's repairs. He must have received the report that the leader of the unit had been killed, and he should be hurriedly preparing to dispatch his troops right around now. So if I went to see their barracks now, I should be able to discern the military might at his disposal.

"You know where they are?" Seravimia asked.

"Of course." The town's structure was similar to mine, so I could guess where it would be. It should be somewhere that would serve as a base during a monster invasion and be near the lord's mansion, which was easy to find because it was the biggest building in town. We couldn't even get lost if we wanted to.

Without needing to ask anyone, we headed toward it.

Gradually, the market stalls were replaced with pretty buildings. This must have been the area where the most wealthy commoners lived. Then after a while, we eventually reached the area near Baron Dulac's mansion.

The barracks shouldn't be too far from here. Just as I had that thought, I noticed a five-meter-tall wall surrounding something. I could hear the voices of the soldiers training on the other side, so I was certain it was the barracks. They were being hidden by the wall, but there was a church nearby, so we should be able to see them if we climbed the spire.

I can't miss such an opportunity.

"Let's sneak into the church to peek at the barracks."

Unless there was a particular reason, all churches had the same structure, so there was no need to investigate beforehand. Thanks

to being dressed like adventurers, we easily entered the chapel together with some believers. I spotted a door leading farther inside, so we went through it.

People must have assumed we were adventurers hired by the church for a job, because nobody stopped us.

As we proceeded down the narrow corridor, we heard footsteps and halted. Someone was coming from the left turn ahead. The stairs leading to the spire were in that direction, so we couldn't turn back here.

"What will you do?" Seravimia asked in a whisper.

Instead of replying, I activated a spell. *"Shadow Sleep."*

The next instant, we heard the sound of something collapsing. We walked silently until the corner, then I peeked at the left corridor, hiding myself behind the wall. A nun lay prone in the hallway. Because a vase had fallen next to her, scattering its water and flowers on the carpet, it looked like a crime had occurred. It seemed she had struck her head when falling, but thanks to the carpet, it shouldn't have hurt her.

I wondered where to hide her, but I couldn't find a suitable place, and we didn't have time to waste, so I decided to just leave her there.

"Let's go."

Adele and Seravimia nodded, and we proceeded to the stairs leading to the spire. Thankfully, we reached the top without meeting anyone else. The view was unobstructed in all directions, but there wasn't a fence to prevent falling, and the wind was strong, so a wrong step could make you fall if you weren't careful. Above us was a hanging bell, and below us were the barracks and the training area surrounded by walls.

"Baron Dulac is giving a speech to his soldiers," Seravimia said. At the center of the training grounds, in front of the ranks of men in leather armor, was a man wearing clothes with excessive ornaments.

So he's *Dulac, the shitty baron aiming for my domain, huh? He's older than I thought. At least in his fifties, I'd say.*

Behind him was another man. "And who's that?" I asked Seravimia, pointing at him. She was the game creator, so she should

know.

"A knight... Ah, no, Ser Yon was demoted. Must be his heir, Matteo, then."

It was my first time seeing him. Apparently, there were high expectations for him as the next head of his house. He was a noble, so he naturally had a lot of mana, and at first glance he seemed to be used to battle, so he should be as strong or stronger than Ser Yon. I couldn't underestimate him just because he was the son of the perpetually inept Baron Dulac.

"Can you hear what he's saying, Adele?" Beastfolk had better hearing than humans, so even if I couldn't hear anything from here, maybe she could.

"There is too much noise, so I cannot focus on his voice..." she replied sadly, her dog ears drooping.

"Don't mind it." I patted her head in comfort. It wasn't enough to lower my opinion of her.

Seravimia looked slightly annoyed for some reason, but I ignored it for now. Instead, I released my mana and strengthened my vision. It allowed me to see things from afar, enlarging them like when using a telescope, but it wasn't enough to see the movement of Baron Dulac's mouth. However, while I couldn't understand what he was saying, I could still learn a few things.

"Looks like they're eager to fight." The first thing I noticed was the angry expressions of the soldiers. Apparently, my taunting and killing some of them had united them in their rage against me. "Also, some of them have better armor. Most have leather, but a few are wearing metal that seems to have been endowed with magic."

In the game, you could strengthen weapons and armor, which would add a "+1" to their names. In this world, it worked by using enhancement magic. Baron Dulac must have reduced the weight of the metal armor and helmets and increased their defensive power with enhancement magic. Maybe some other effects too, if he had enough money.

At least, that was what I would have done.

Naturally, he wasn't able to provide the metal armor to all of his soldiers, so most were wearing leather. The idiot weaklings who had

attacked the bridge had worn the latter, but surely the men wearing metal armor were different. They must be Baron Dulac's elite troops.

I didn't think my soldiers were weaker than his, but I clearly lost in terms of equipment. He had used way more money than a rural baron should have. My men wouldn't be able to win against the troops in metal armor, so I would ask the Verdant Wind sisters to take care of them.

"Now that you have seen this, what will you do, Baron Girard?" Seravimia asked, as though testing me.

"I'd love to just wipe them out right here, right now, but that's unfortunately impossible." Even Adele wouldn't be able to do it. She might be the strongest in duels, but she would lose against a large number of enemies. Of course, it *would* be possible if I asked for the help of the hero grinning next to me, but I would rather not owe her a big favor. "For now, we'll observe them and try to estimate when they'll depart—" I stopped midway through my sentence when I noticed a change in the barracks.

Baron Dulac had finished his speech, and around a hundred soldiers—twenty of whom were the elite troops—started to walk, carrying backpacks. Alongside them, drawn by horses, were three carts and a luxurious canopied carriage for a noble.

As I had thought, they were done with their preparations. They moved fast.

"Say, Baron Girard."

"What?"

"Do you think you can win against them head-on? If you ask now, I can help you."

"No thanks."

Seravimia was acting like a dishonest trader, offering her help in a situation where it would be hard to refuse. If I accepted, I'd be forced to go with her on her ancient ruins tour. I didn't want to, so of course I refused.

"Then I suppose the only help you'll receive from me are the Verdant Wind sisters."

"Can I count on them?" Just because they were strong in the game didn't mean they also were in reality. I wanted to know their

current strength.

"Of course. I trained them, had them level up, and even taught them advanced spells. They're strong enough to deal with all of Baron Dulac's soldiers on their own."

In short, not only had I obtained two allies who had been trained without me having to make a single effort, but I could also use them without being indebted to Seravimia. Wonderful.

"Then I'll use them to my heart's content."

"Sure. Ah, but they're some of my favorite characters, so don't order them to do anything unreasonable." She pressured me to not use them as disposable pawns.

The elf sisters were some of the rare adventurers to like the Girard territory, so I never planned to sacrifice them. Moreover, I wanted them to help me more in the future, so I would need them to stay alive.

"Naturally. I'll take care of them."

"If you could treat me just as kindly—"

"It is getting noisy below us," Adele interjected, her dog ears twitching. Her eyes were closed as she focused on her hearing. "The nun from earlier has woken up and is telling people that someone is trespassing inside the church."

We were out of time. Thankfully, I'd learned what I had wanted to, as well as about the existence of the elite troops, so now wasn't a bad time to retreat.

Descending the stairs would only make them find us, so we would need to use my magic to escape. Thankfully, there were a lot of buildings around, which meant lots of shadows.

"We're going back to the Girard territory once we've checked Baron Dulac's destination," I said.

It was easy for something unexpected to occur during a war, so I had to ascertain if they were waiting for the bridge to be repaired or if they would cross the river by swimming somewhere else. If it were the latter, I'd need to ask Ludwig to move our troops.

"Are you sure you'll make it in time?" Seravimia asked.

"They're moving slowly, so we should be fine." Baron Dulac's men were going on foot while we had horses, so we should return to my

domain faster than they would arrive.

"Hmm... Well, if you say so."

Voices from below approached us, likely people from the church climbing the stairs. If they found us, they would try to restrain us, and we would lose time defending ourselves—making us unable to follow Baron Dulac's soldiers.

Time to escape.

"Put your hands on me," I said.

Adele hugged me, putting her arms around my neck. Because of our breastplates and her leather gloves, I couldn't feel her softness or her warmth, however. I did feel her breath near my ear, though.

"I suppose I should do the same." Seravimia got carried away and tried to embrace me too, but I stopped her by clutching her head with my hand. This kind of treatment was good enough for her. After all, who knew what she would try once she was glued to me.

Thankfully, she understood I was wary of her, and she didn't protest.

"I heard voices!" someone shouted not far below us. They would reach us in a few seconds.

"Shadow Walk."

We sank into my shadow and emerged from the shade in a backstreet. That took a toll on me, greatly diminishing my mana. My vision blurred, and I lost strength in my legs. Thankfully, because Adele was hugging me, I didn't fall.

"I need a little rest." Unable to stand, I put my hand against a wall and leaned against it to sit on the ground.

"Your magic is pretty unfair," Seravimia commented, looking at the church's spire.

You're the one who created it.

"Well, should I thank you for giving it to me?" I joked.

"Maybe you should," Seravimia answered, strangely happy.

"If I do, will that make my life easier?"

"Nope. It's boring if the protagonist doesn't suffer, after all."

Here it is again—her twisted sense of value. Some men liked it when the heroine suffered, and in her case, it seemed it was the protagonist. If she had created the game wanting to torment and

humiliate Jack as much as possible, then I kinda pitied him.

"I don't—and don't want to—understand such an opinion. If we can't understand each other, don't you think it would be better to distance ourselves?"

"Never. I won't let you go." Seravimia's mood suddenly changed. She went from the earlier enthusiasm to clingy, heavy obsession, wrapping her mana around me. I couldn't move, and it felt like I was completely bound. I knew that she wanted my body, so perhaps she would try to abduct me, but I wouldn't let her. After all, I had the best guard in the world.

"If you get closer, I will attack." Adele drew her Twin Hydra Blades and stood before me to protect me. Her tail was standing up, showing her alertness.

The two of them glared at each other for a moment, then Seravimia exhaled and dispersed her mana.

"Sorry. We had a nice chat and I got a little carried away."

What a poor excuse. As if she would lose control of herself when she had fun. I couldn't let my guard down around her.

"We can't waste time. Save your games for later," I said, getting up now that my mana had replenished a little. Adele looked at me worriedly, so I comforted her by caressing her cheek, then moved in front of Seravimia. "I won't go along with your plans."

"I love your attitude. That and the way you're oddly sincere about some things really fits my tastes. I'll definitely have you kneel before me someday." Seravimia shot me a challenging smile.

"Find someone else." It wasn't the first time I'd thought this, but she really was impossible to communicate with once she entered her own little world.

I gave up and turned toward Adele. "I'm sure you're curious, but don't ask anything and follow me."

Despite my request being pretty unreasonable, Adele nodded obediently. My conversation with Seravimia had been rather risky, but with this she shouldn't tell anyone. And even if she betrayed me, I should be able to deal with it.

"If this is what you wish, Master Jack, then I will keep quiet."

"Good. Let's go."

Now that I was able to move again after resting for a little while, we went onto the main street. Baron Dulac's soldiers were currently heading outside of town. People stayed to the edges of the road to not be in the way, watching the soldiers. They all looked uneasy, and some women—likely lovers or mothers—even cried. That made me feel slightly guilty about killing the soldiers, but losing would just mean that my own people would be saddened instead. It also meant I would die, so I had to win no matter what.

I renewed my determination as I observed Baron Dulac and his men from our hidden vantage point. Once they were out of sight, we went to retrieve our horses; then, after concealing our faces, we had them gallop to get ahead, deliberately straying from the road and cutting across the grassland.

As expected, they weren't marching quickly, and having to carry backpacks didn't help. We could already see them. We passed them, only halting at a junction in the forest. The road split in two—the left led to First Village and the right to another territory. I didn't think they would go right, but just in case, I decided to wait here to check.

We hid the horses a little ways away, and I had Adele keep watch over them while Seravimia and I monitored the junction.

"There's nothing to do, so let's talk," Seravimia suggested.

"Shut up." I didn't get her alone for a chat. I just didn't want Adele to be with her, and I didn't know what Seravimia would do if I left her on her own, so I was forced to take her with me.

Please, just shut up already.

"No. We've finally got some alone time, so please listen to me." I thought she would comply, but unexpectedly, she didn't. Her expression was serious, so maybe what she wanted to tell me was important. It would be a problem if I displeased her too much, and we had time until Baron Dulac and his men arrived, so I guessed I could entertain her.

"Make it short."

Seravimia smiled, revealing her white teeth. She just kept switching from one expression to another.

"It's about the ancient ruins. To tell you the truth, I wanted to

give them to you, Baron Girard. You know, like a surprise present. Once you have them, you won't have to care about what other nobles think, and you can just blow their domains away if they bother you. In short, you'd get power and freedom. Wouldn't that be great?" Seravimia said all at once, then stared at me.

She was fundamentally wrong. In the first place, I didn't want overwhelming power to rule the kingdom—let alone the world. I just wanted to live peacefully and luxuriously like a noble. Hoping for more would be beyond my means and just bring my own downfall.

"I don't want them. I'm fine with just the Girard territory."

"Why?" Seravimia's tone suddenly turned gloomy, and I could see a bottomless obsession in her eyes. And the target of that obsession was me, which made a chill run down my spine. I instinctively understood that the situation was bad, and that I needed to run away. "I'm devoting myself to you, so why don't you accept me? If I have any flaws, I'll fix them, so please look at me."

Seravimia couldn't restrain her mana, which was loaded with her murky feelings, and it scattered out of her. The air became heavy like mud, and it got hard to breathe. It was the second time that this had happened today. I could feel her impatience, and that she wanted my commitment right here, right now.

"Say something," she pressed me.

"Why are you so obsessed with me?" I somehow managed to ask. Her feelings toward me couldn't be explained just by the fact that we both had memories of our past lives. It would be easy to understand if she simply loved me, but based on what I felt from her mana, that wasn't it.

"You're the only one who can understand me. I don't want to be alone anymore," she replied.

"What about the Verdant Wind sisters? You like them, no?"

"They're pretty and obedient, so I keep them close to me. But they can't understand me."

So I was the only one who could understand her? But why? As someone who couldn't trust other people, the way she needed to depend on someone else was beyond my comprehension.

"So please, join me—" I quickly covered Seravimia's mouth as I

heard the sound of boots stomping on the ground nearing us.

So, which will it be? I wondered what path they would take as the vanguard arrived at the junction on a horse. He was one of the elite troops in metal armor. Because of his helmet, I couldn't see his face, but based on his build, it wasn't Baron Dulac or his son, Matteo. It might be the captain. Two lines of soldiers walked behind him, and in the middle of them was a carriage with House Dulac's emblem, so Baron Dulac had to be inside. Behind the carriage were a few carts carrying tents and food, so they were likely planning to make an encampment. That meant Baron Dulac wasn't aiming to attack the instant he reached his destination using blitzkrieg tactics, but intended to settle down before attacking.

That confirms where he's heading—or so I thought, but then I saw a segment of the soldiers going right and the rest going left, splitting their forces. There was no way he would try to invade another domain just before his war with me, and I didn't hear anything about him cooperating with another noble, so the soldiers who went right would likely change direction midway toward my demesne.

Are they planning to attack First Village from behind? No, that would be too long of a detour. Then they must be targeting another village or my mansion.

I hadn't expected an attack on two fronts. If I had some of the soldiers defending the bridge move to my residence, then I might not be able to completely protect First Village. Even with the Verdant Wind sisters' help, I still needed to have some troops there.

I wanted to take some measures, but I didn't have enough manpower. I could only hope that Julianne and Gwynt, who had stayed at my mansion, would be enough to repel the enemy.

"Sorry, but the discussion will have to stop here," I whispered into Seravimia's ear. "I need to go back to my domain and prepare for the incoming war."

"But I still haven't heard your answer," she complained.

"If it's about the ancient ruins, then my answer won't change. Give up."

I wanted to return to my domain as soon as possible, so I didn't

wait for her reply and left Seravimia behind without watching the enemy's march until the end, rejoining with Adele.

"She isn't following us, huh?" I muttered as I straddled my horse.

"Did you say something, Master Jack?"

"It's nothing. Let's go."

We galloped toward the Girard territory.

A while after we separated from Seravimia, we neared the almost completely repaired bridge. One of the soldiers posted to monitor the enemy saw us and ran toward the camp, likely going to report my return to Ludwig.

"Welcome back," the guards greeted us when we arrived. I only glanced at them without stopping and went toward my tent, where Ludwig was waiting.

"How was the Dulac barony?" he asked, wanting to know the state of the enemy. His caution was a good thing, as it meant he wasn't complacent and wouldn't let his guard down while our preparations proceeded.

"Baron Dulac is coming with almost a hundred soldiers."

"So it will be a head-on battle..."

"Yeah. Moreover, some of them have armor endowed with magic. Normal arrows won't be able to pierce them."

Even after knowing that the enemy outnumbered us and had better equipment, Ludwig didn't show a hint of despair. His will to fight was high, his heart ablaze with the mission to protect his homeland and family. This occurred to me during the incident with the lesser earth dragon too, but my men truly loved their homeland. Most likely, it was because travel was quite difficult in this world compared to Japan. Their hometowns were everything to them, so they were really hostile toward invaders.

"But don't worry, we have the Verdant Wind sisters. Now, we need to prepare for the fight," I declared, doing my best to sound calm and solemn. "Tell the carpenters to go back to town. Then have some men keep watch over the bridge at a distance outside arrow range," I ordered Ludwig.

While I had obtained a good pretext to fight, I didn't plan to go

on the offensive. We were outnumbered, and they had better equipment, so I chose to strengthen our defense and intercept them instead. Like previously, we would stay at a distance to avoid being shot by arrows, and if the enemy crossed the bridge, then I'd unleash the Verdant Wind sisters on them.

"Also, have someone send a message to my residence to warn them that Baron Dulac is planning a surprise attack." Considering the time that had passed since I had seen them split, they must already have entered my domain, being able to move faster in smaller numbers. Perhaps my message wouldn't make it in time, but I still decided to send a soldier to warn them of the danger. "If the fight has already begun, then the priority is to protect Julianne and Hilde."

"Understood!" Ludwig saluted with a hand on his chest, then he turned back and ran toward the soldiers to relay my commands, leaving me alone with Adele.

"We're only around twenty, so depending on the situation, I'll have to fight too," I said.

To be honest, I'd rather wait in the back with my arms folded, but things never were that easy. Baron Dulac was a noble, meaning he had a lot of mana and likely knew how to fight. Coupled with the fact that we were outnumbered, that would normally mean our defeat. That was why having strong comrades was important—overwhelming power could make up for the difference in numbers.

"I shall always be by your side—in life and death," Adele declared solemnly, which reassured me that she wouldn't betray me.

Kevin was still suspicious, and Lumié had seen me attempt to murder my parents, so I trusted them less than Adele.

Julianne was basically like a child infatuated with the idea of being in love. A trivial thing could make her disappointed in me, which made her the least trustworthy in a way.

"Well said. The perfect answer for a guard." I patted Adele's head, and she closed her eyes in pleasure. The way she acted like a dog increased my trust in her even more. Beastfolk were pretty simpleminded and easy to handle—like that one soldier of Baron Dulac who had rushed to his death. "We still have a little time before the battle begins. Let's check if anyone is slacking off."

They had been completely retrained, so it should be fine, but I wanted to ascertain that they were following my orders correctly with my own eyes.

I was also worried about the situation at my mansion, but I had left some soldiers there, so they should be able to deal with an attack.

Well, in the end, even if we lose, House Girard will continue to exist as long as I live. With time and money, I can just gather new comrades, I thought coldheartedly.

Chapter 5: Respective Duties

Several days had passed since my husband had left us. I couldn't remember the exact number because of my mother's harsh training, though.

I could manage to learn how to dance, as it was just a matter of how to move my body, but embroidery was impossible. And right now, I was in my bedroom, together with my mother and Gwynt—who was acting as a guard—who watched me as I slowly embroidered. I had lost my patience and thrown my work a few times, earning the ire of my mother, but it just wasn't my thing. I couldn't focus, and my progress was slow. I couldn't even embroider a flower on a handkerchief because I wanted to throw in the towel after doing just a petal.

I glanced at my mother, and she made a terrifying expression when our eyes met. I wished she would just give up already. I hadn't been able to train for a while, and I wanted to do some exercise.

If the enemy attacked us right now, then I could participate in protecting the mansion... I fantasized, escaping from reality. If I didn't, I would lose it. While I didn't regret betrothing my husband, bridal training was way too severe.

I knew I wouldn't be able to concentrate if I stayed in that state of mind, so I looked outside the window to change my mood. One of the soldiers guarding the courtyard was fighting someone.

"Invaders! Stay on guard, everyone!" Kevin shouted urgently, and the mansion erupted with activity.

Huh? Did my fantasy become reality?!

"It seems something is happening," Mother said. Most people would be afraid in such a situation, but my mother was calm as she took out a small knife. As the wife of a knight, she had nerves of steel. I had even heard that she had accompanied my father on the

battlefield a few times, so a commotion of this level wasn't enough to make her lose her composure.

"I will take a look. Please stay here," Gwynt said before leaving the room.

It wasn't the time to work on my embroidery anymore. I knew it was inappropriate, but I was thrilled by the situation. I threw the embroidery hoop aside and skipped to the shelf where my equipment was.

"Julianne..." My mother was exasperated, but I didn't care. After all, my husband approved of me despite the fact that I was crazy enough to want to become a knight. So far from complaining, I was certain he would *praise* me if I repelled the invaders!

I hummed a song I had loved since I was a child as I put on my mithril boots, gauntlets, and breastplate. Then finally, I took my short spear and swung it lightly.



My movements were duller than I'd expected, and my body was a bit stiff. I would need to retrain myself after the battle.

"Is Baron Girard truly fine with a girl like this?" Mother muttered, a hand on her cheek, but I ignored her. *Of course he is!*

Just after I was done with my preparations, I heard footsteps coming from the corridor, so I pointed my weapon at the entrance. The door slowly opened, and a head peeked out. I almost thrust my short spear at it but thankfully managed to stop myself. It was Gwynt, who had gone to check the situation.

"Sir Kevin has defeated a few trespassers, but it seems there are more, so please stay here—"

"This is terrible! As the future lady of this house, I must help!" I declared. I couldn't allow the ruffians who had invaded my dear husband's residence to live. *I'll stab them to death!*

However, when I tried to leave my room, someone grabbed my shoulder. I turned around and found my mother staring at me with a blank look while Gwynt silently closed the door and stood before it to prevent my exit. What great coordination. The two of them were really wary that I would do something reckless.

"Why are you stopping me from distinguishing myself and earning my husband's praise?" I asked. Depending on their answer, I might escape through the window. We were on the second floor, but I should be fine if I strengthened myself with mana.

"Why can you only think about fighting...?" My mother sighed, looking disappointed. "The war between Baron Girard and Baron Dulac is about to start. Surely these enemies are either assassins or trained soldiers. This is too dangerous for you."

Huh? Really? I thought the comrades of the bandits from before had come to take revenge!

"Their primary target must be Baron Girard," my mother continued.

"But my husband isn't present," I replied.

"It is possible that the enemy doesn't know that." She was implying that the reason the invaders hadn't retreated despite having been intercepted was that they were still looking for someone who wasn't even here. "And Baron Dulac likely has given another

order.”

“There is something else?”

“He must also have ordered your kidnapping, Julianne.”

What?! Why?

“You look like you don’t even understand why you would be targeted...” Mother sighed, exasperated, but I was already used to it. My husband had already accepted how I was, so I didn’t care anymore!

“Do you know why, Gwynt?” she asked the other person in the room.

“Lady Julianne is Master Jack’s fiancée, so she is a valuable hostage,” he answered.

“Exactly. You pass.” My mother sighed once more. “Almost anyone should be able to think of that...”

The two of them stared at me as though I were a stupid child.

“Moreover, you yourself are also a valuable hostage, Dame Hilde. If you die without Master Jack doing anything to rescue you, his reputation would take a hit, and Baron Dulac would be able to move Ser Yon,” Gwynt added.

“Exactly. We could become Baron Girard’s weaknesses if we are not careful, so we need to stay here and wait patiently. We even have a wonderful guard,” Mother said, gently caressing Gwynt’s cheek. Her touch was suspicious. Even though she had Father, Mother had the bad habit of doing things that would tempt men.

I’m devoted to my husband, so I’ll never do that!

“Isn’t there a secret room used for emergency evacuation?” she asked Gwynt.

“Sorry, but I do not know.”

Don’t flush like that! Mother will get even more carried away!

“Really?” She hugged him and leaned her face toward his.

I couldn’t allow her to go further than that and forcefully pulled them apart.

“Don’t you feel bad for Father?” I asked, glaring at her.

“I don’t.” She looked at me as though I was just a child and wouldn’t be able to understand. “Didn’t I raise you to do anything for the good of the family?”

"What does that have to do with what you just did...?"

"If we die, then Yon will be the only member left of House Froid. So I did what I had to do to survive."

In short, she hadn't been seducing Gwynt, but trying to extract information about a hidden room from him? By using her body to tempt him? Just to avert a crisis for the family? I couldn't understand why she cared so much about our house when even Father had told me to not care and just live happily.

"This is how you should act as a noblewoman, Julianne," she continued. "You must learn how to use your body in that way too."

No way! I get goose bumps just thinking of a man other than my husband touching me! There's no way I can follow the same path as Mother. I want to be useful on the battlefield, not in bed.

"Wait. What was that sound...?" Gwynt said, and I strained my ears.

I heard several footsteps from the corridor. They became louder as they approached my room.

"Lady Julianne! Invaders are coming your way! We shall fight them, so please escape!" shouted one of the soldiers I had trained.

The door opened and black-clad men intruded into my room, followed by two of our soldiers. "We shall protect Lady Julianne no matter what!" They began to fight the black-clad men.

"I will help them to buy time, so please escape through the win—" Gwynt yelled, having judged our side was at a disadvantage, but I didn't listen until the end and pointed my short spear at the window, sensing danger.

The next instant, the window was broken as another black-clad man entered. He appeared to be alone, as nobody followed after him.

"Hah!" I strengthened myself with mana and thrust my short spear at the enemy, but he dodged to the side, and I only grazed his arm.

If not for the lull in my training, I wouldn't have missed!

I could hear the sound of weapons clashing near the room's entrance, but I believed the soldiers and Gwynt would be able to manage and focused on my opponent, thrusting my short spear at

him before he could get up.

A dull *clang* echoed as my attack was deflected by the invader's shortsword, making me stab the floor instead. He must have thought that he was winning because I could feel his smile even behind his cloth mask. He took out a knife from under his waistcloth and threw it at me.

Don't underestimate me! It would be one thing against a normal noblewoman who didn't know how to fight, but it wouldn't work against me. I was used to battling monsters.

I struck the side of the knife's blade with my left hand and knocked it away. When the trespasser saw his weapon stick into the wall, he froze in surprise.

I must punish him for intruding into my husband's residence!

I pulled my short spear out of the floor and swung it horizontally, but he dodged by crouching. I let myself be carried by the momentum of my swing on purpose, and once my back faced him, I pivoted on my left foot and delivered a backward kick in his face, knocking him away.

"I didn't expect you to survive," I said. I had put enough strength into my kick to blow his head away, and yet not only was it still attached, he hadn't even lost consciousness. My boots were made of mithril, which was very tough, so that wasn't normal. Was he strengthening himself with mana—

"Ice Arrow." My thoughts were interrupted by the trespasser's spell.

An arrow of ice flew my way, but I easily dodged it by bending sideways. It was immediately followed by two more knives, which I parried with the shaft of my short spear. I thought I had defended against all of his attacks, but before I knew it, the black-clad man was before me, his fist approaching my face. Not wanting my nose to be broken, I hastily lowered my head to meet his fist with my forehead instead.

I was blown away and almost fainted, but I didn't let go of my weapon as my back struck a wall, forcing the air out of my lungs.

It seemed that the invader was prioritizing me over my powerless mother and Gwynt, who was fighting, as he rushed over to me with

a knife. Was he planning to kill me? Did that mean that I didn't even have any value as a hostage? Did he think that my husband wouldn't care if I were kidnapped?

How dare you look down on me! Of course my husband cares about me!

Answering my rage, my mana gushed forth, increasing my physical abilities even further. I grabbed the blade of the incoming knife with my left hand—thankfully, I was wearing gauntlets, so it only cut me a little—and crushed it as I punched the bewildered man with my right. Pieces of metal tumbled through the air, sparkling from the reflection of light.

"You may see me as an inexperienced girl who can't do much for her house, Mother," I said as I kicked the man into the air. He fell onto his back. "But I am prepared to be stained with blood for my beloved husband! I can be useful to him in battle!"

I stabbed at the collapsed man with my short spear, but he avoided it by rolling to the side. I had noticed that he was conscious thanks to the slight movement of his fingers, so I had known he would dodge and was ready to stomp his head. I felt some resistance, but his skull quickly gave way and exploded like a fruit, scattering blood everywhere and dyeing my body and face in red.

"Julianne..." my mother muttered.

Please don't look at me so worriedly, Mother. I'll make my family happy in my own way.

When I looked toward the entrance, the battle was already over. The intruders were all dead, their blood spilling on the floor. We had won.

However, I noticed that while Gwynt was standing up, breathless, the two soldiers who had come to help me were lying on the floor. One had a large cut on his neck with a lot of blood—he must have died instantly. The other had been slashed from the shoulder to the chest. The wound was deep and fatal—he was on the verge of death and wouldn't make it.

I couldn't just watch him die like that, so I walked over to him, knelt in a puddle of blood, and held his upper body in my arms.

"I am...sorry...for my incompetence... I was...not...strong

enough...”

“There is no need for you to apologize. You fought valiantly for us—you should be proud,” I said. For an instant, I felt like he was smiling, and finally, I remembered his name. He had been one of the men who had subjugated the bandits with me.

“Was I...useful...to you...?”

“Of course. If not for you, I would have been killed, and the Girard territory would have perished. The two of you are the heroes of your homeland, Toell.”

“You...remembered...my name...”

“I also know that you like sweets and have a little sister! Come to think of it, haven’t you been worrying about the present you should give her for her birthday next month?” He had talked about it during training, saying he would fight for his homeland with a radiant smile. *Why did I only remember this now?* “I shall never forget you. I promise your sister and your family will never be in need.”

“Thank...you...very much... Now...I can...die...without...any...re...” Toell passed away without being able to finish his sentence. Was giving his life for a heartless woman who had only remembered his name just before his death really worth it?

“I would also be dead without them,” Gwynt said as he stepped over next to me, his shortsword dripping with blood. Despite his sorrowful expression, his voice was filled with kindness.

His concern pained me a little. Even though people had died for me, nobody blamed me. I felt as though needles were prickling my chest.

“They met an honorable death while accomplishing their duty,” Gwynt continued. *But isn’t that meaningless if they die?* I thought but didn’t say aloud. “So please, do not look so sad.”

Gwynt was kind, but he was mistaken. I wasn’t sad. I just felt frustrated at my powerlessness, and I was unable to forgive myself—not only for being unable to protect the people who had looked up to me, but also because my survival was thanks to their sacrifices. I couldn’t help but blame myself for not training harder.

“This isn’t the time to talk. There are other enemies,” my mother warned us. She was right—we had to fight and survive.

"Then I will defeat all of the intruders," I declared.

"No, that isn't what I..." Mother looked like she wanted to say something, but I ignored her.

With my short spear in hand, I exited my bedroom, prepared to deal with the trespassers in lieu of the dead soldiers. As I walked through the empty corridor, I heard sobbing from another room. I went inside and found Lumié hugging a crying apprentice maid.

"We hid, so *we* are fine, but..." Lumié trailed off. It seemed that the soldiers in my room hadn't been the only ones to die.

I ground my teeth. "Do you know where the intruders are?"

"They are fighting against Sir Kevin on the first floor."

"Got it. Thanks."

There had only been a few invaders in my room because Kevin was stopping the others. I had to quickly go help him.

I went to the stairs and descended to the first floor, where I found the corpses of two of our soldiers. Once again, I felt my chest tighten when I thought of how they had died to protect us. However, I didn't have time to mourn them, so I chewed my lip and left their bodies, continuing on my way.

When I reached the entrance, I found Kevin standing in the center of it, covered with blood and the corpses of about ten black-clad men around him. Had he defeated them all by himself? There was no way he was just a mere butler. Maybe he had achieved great things on the battlefield in the past?

I stepped forward, wanting to check if he was all right, but I immediately froze at the bloodlust directed my way. Thankfully, it stopped when Kevin realized it was me, but I couldn't stop myself from shaking. I would need a moment to regain my composure.

"Why are you here, Lady Julianne?" Kevin asked.

"I wanted to help defend the mansion," I replied. "Are you all right?"

I approached Kevin, and when I looked closer at him, I noticed that he had a deep stab wound in his stomach. It didn't seem like an important internal organ had been hit, but considering all the blood that was gushing out of him, he was likely going to die at this rate!

I tore one of my sleeves and tied it around Kevin's wound. Even

though it should really hurt, his expression didn't change as he calmly looked at me.

"You seem used to this," he said.

"I had to do it often during monster hunts." When soldiers got injured, my father and I helped with first aid, so I was far better at it than embroidery.

I finished with a tight knot and stood up, holding my short spear as I turned around toward the two black-clad men who had arrived. At first glance, they were only wielding a sword each, but perhaps they were hiding knives in their clothes. Even from afar, I could sense how much mana they had, and they seemed very strong. They were likely greatly strengthening themselves with mana.

"Target found. Let's kill her," one of them said, and they suddenly vanished.

I sensed them coming from both sides, so I backstepped, avoiding the two swords that slashed through the air just in front of my eyes.

They're fast!

Realizing I wouldn't be able to use my short spear swiftly enough, I kicked one of them in the stomach. I felt something break inside him, but he caught my leg, and the other man raised his sword overhead to swing it at me. However, despite his wound, Kevin charged at the man and blew him away before he could. He also knocked the intruder holding my leg away with a punch.

Isn't he way too strong for his age?!

"Leave one of them to me," he said.

"But—"

"I am not so weak I would die from this much." Kevin smiled savagely, his face painted with blood, then began to fight with one of the trespassers. Even though he was injured and bare-handed, he held his own against an armed opponent. It looked as though he was burning away his remaining life in a last show of strength.

I didn't know what drove him so far, but one thing was sure: "As Lord Jack's wife, I can't lose to him!" It was my job to protect the house during my husband's absence. I would lose my place if I let Kevin do it!

I bent my knees and lowered my stance. My muscles strained as I strengthened my body to its limits. The instant I saw the intruder who had been punched get up, I leaped toward him. Unfortunately, he noticed me when I was one meter away from him, and he dodged my thrust. I followed by swinging my outstretched arm to the side, but he avoided the blow by bending his back.

He's got impressive reflexes!

Then the invader tried to grab my short spear, so I jumped back, creating some distance between us. However, my opponent vanished once again. He was fast, but not as much as earlier. I twisted my torso to avoid the blade aiming at my chest, but I was a little late and it cut into my breastplate. If not for my protective gear, I would have gotten another big scar.

My adversary didn't stop there, though. He followed with a swing of his sword, so I dodged by stepping back, but he also advanced, so I couldn't distance myself from him. He aimed at my head, my chest, my waist, and my legs, so I wasn't able to repel all of his attacks with my short spear, and my breastplate and clothing got more damaged. I earned several cuts and started bleeding, so I likely wouldn't be able to keep this up for more than a few minutes.

But I won't give up until the very end!

Noticing an opening, I thrust my weapon at him. He used his sword to strike the shaft of my short spear down, making me miss my attack, but everything was going as I had planned. After all, this wasn't a duel—I had a strong ally on my side.

Kevin hurled his adversary into mine, and they both fell to the floor atop one another. "Now!" he shouted.

I immediately understood what he wanted me to do. Ready to even have my muscles tear apart, I strengthened my body above its limits, then using my hips, my back, my arms, and my hands in tandem, I stabbed both of their heads with all my force, killing them instantly.

However, the instant I ascertained our victory, I heard tearing sounds coming from my body, and intense pain assaulted me.

"Ow!" Unable to endure it, my body went limp, and I collapsed. Unfortunately, that didn't stop the pain—it only got worse. I couldn't

even lift a finger.

"I would expect no less from the woman chosen by Master Jack," Kevin said, standing near my face. Blood was still dripping from his stomach despite my first aid. The intense movements must have enlarged his wound.

How come he's in better shape than me with his injury? And here I thought I would be able to contribute... I got slightly dejected.

"If after all of this there are no more reinforcements, then it should be safe to assume we have dealt with all of the intruders," Kevin continued. "Please stay down and rest." He didn't help me and went to the second floor.

I had heard that he had been serving House Girard for generations, but wasn't he a little too cold toward me even though I was his master's fiancée? I had helped to repel the intruders, so he could at least recognize my worth and not just leave me here, surrounded by corpses.

Unable to move my body, I had no choice but to wait while gazing at the ceiling, but eventually, I heard footsteps coming my way. I turned my eyes in their direction and saw Lumié and Ina, the apprentice maid, descending the stairs. I hoped they were coming to help me. I had had enough of the hard floor and would rather be in a soft bed.

"Lady Julianne!" Lumié shouted when she saw me. "Are you all right?!" She was far kinder than Kevin.

They were carrying bandages and healing potions, so hopefully they would use them on me. At least, I was glad that they recognized me as part of House Girard. That meant that the soldiers hadn't sacrificed themselves for a worthless woman. No, they had given their lives for the fiancée of Baron Girard—his future wife. Knowing that they hadn't died for nothing brought me some comfort.

Various emotions swirled inside me, so complex I couldn't put them into words. However, there was one thing I was certain of: "I can't wait for you to come back, Dear."

Currently, he should be fighting the enemy together with Adele. *I couldn't protect your precious soldiers, but I did manage to defend*

your home, so please come back safely.

Chapter 6: Decisive Battle

The standoff with Baron Dulac's soldiers, who were across the river, had been going on for the past two days.

This morning, I had received a report that my mansion had been attacked. A part of my residence had been destroyed, and a few soldiers had died, but everyone else was fine. It would have complicated things if Julianne, Hilde, or Lumié had been taken hostage, so I had been relieved to hear that they had successfully managed to repel the assailants.

But now that his surprise assault had failed, Baron Dulac would likely act soon. When I exited my tent with Adele, wanting to check the situation outside, Ludwig rushed over to me urgently.

"The enemy has started moving! They seem very intent on fighting, so I do not think they are only planning to taunt us!"

"So the battle is finally beginning. Have our side prepare quickly!" I ordered.

"Understood!" Ludwig saluted, his hand on his chest, then he ran to the soldiers and shouted instructions.

Meanwhile, I walked through the encampment until I found the Verdant Wind sisters.

"Olivia. Lily. This one won't end at a small skirmish, so I'll have the both of you stay near me. I want you to use a large-scale spell when I give you the signal."

"Sure, but... Are you sure it'll be fine?" Olivia asked, anxious about our inferiority in numbers.

"Don't worry. As long as we have Adele, your magic, and myself, we'll win."

Adele was the game's strongest character, and that strength didn't change even in reality. As long as the enemy didn't crowd against her, she should be able to defeat the elite troops without issues.

"If you say so. I like this land, so I'll do my best to defend it." Despite her curt tone, Olivia seemed to be motivated.

Now that the preparations were over, the war with Baron Dulac would finally begin.

Hearing about the attack on my mansion stimulated my soldiers' fighting spirit. And with Adele present on the battlefield, they would likely do their best to show her the results of their training.

A little while after I had started to watch over the opposite shore, the enemy deployed their troops. The first line was made of the soldiers with leather armor. They were wielding large shields and spears, and while they didn't appear to be nervous, they didn't seem to be well trained, so they likely were new recruits. Behind them were the troops in metal armor endowed with magic. They were fully alert, and even from far away, I could sense that they were well trained. They were the elite forces.

I couldn't find Baron Dulac's heir among the troops, however, so perhaps he had been in charge of the attack on my residence? I didn't like not knowing where he was.

Everyone on my side was nervously waiting for the enemy attack, and I could feel Ludwig's impatience next to me.

"I thought they would invade right away... Should we really wait without doing anything?" he asked.

"We won't make the first move. Make it absolutely clear to the soldiers—if anyone disobeys and acts on their own, my sword will drain every last drop of their blood."

"Then I need to give it my all to be sure they get the message," he said with a chuckle.

With a warning like that, nobody should go against my command. Or at the very least, they shouldn't lose their nerves and attack before Baron Dulac's men.

I had shown them the stick, so now it was time for the carrot. "Also, tell them they'll be properly rewarded if we win. Moreover, I'll give an additional thirty gold coins to anyone who kills a unit leader. So make sure they work well."

The instant I said I would reward them monetarily, Ludwig's

expression turned serious. That was pretty calculating of him, but I didn't hate it. It was an easy-to-understand motive.

"Very well! Then I shall quickly tell everyone!" Ludwig rushed to the nearby line of soldiers.

Funnily enough, that made Baron Dulac think we were making a move, and he started to give instructions to his men. I couldn't hear what he was saying from here, but he had likely ordered them to prepare to go on the offensive.

"I shall protect you no matter what, Master Jack." Sensing the enemy was going to attack, Adele stood before me. Despite her small size, I felt as safe as if I were behind a rampart.

"I'm counting on you." Adele was acting as my guard and wouldn't go in the front line. I was planning to use the Verdant Wind sisters standing by in the rear instead.

I turned my sight back toward the opposite shore, observing the enemy. Some of the leather-armored troops, who I thought to be disposable pawns, began to advance on the bridge. That was faster than I had expected. Perhaps Baron Dulac was panicking because the surprise attack on my mansion had failed?

The enemy elite troops shot arrows, but there was too much distance between our forces, so they didn't reach us. Naturally, they had known that before shooting, but they had probably hoped that the threat would make my soldiers move, unable to endure the tension. Unfortunately for them, my men wouldn't disobey my command.

The enemy stopped shooting arrows, but the soldiers in leather armor continued to advance along the bridge, almost all the way across it. They were now only a meter away from the Girard territory.

"Soon," I said. They were pushing too far forward for a mere diversion. I could feel it in the air—the battle was about to begin.

"You are amazing, Master Jack. Everything is happening as you have predicted," Ludwig commented as the leather-armored troops entered my demesne. However, they were still in range of the enemy archers, so he didn't order anyone to move yet. He was keeping his composure and assessing the situation properly.

The enemy troops formed five horizontal lines, raising their large shields to cover their bodies. They held spears in their other hands, so it would be difficult to get in range to attack them. Once their formation was set, they started to advance slowly in our direction, applying pressure on us.

My men were inexperienced, so I feared that they would succumb to terror and flee, but my concern was unnecessary.

"It will reflect badly on Miss Adele if we lose. We must win!" I heard someone shout. Their morale was high, and I wouldn't need to intervene.

Ludwig ordered my men to shoot arrows, but they were deflected by the tightly arranged shields. I thought of sending my soldiers to flank the enemy from the rear, but I realized they'd just be caught between the leather-armored soldiers and the elite troops in the rear, so I dismissed the idea.

Then what about Adele? No, that'd be too dangerous.

Even if she could break the first line and force a melee, there was the possibility that she would lose if she fought alone against all of the enemy elite forces.

Well, I guess it's time to use my helpers. I'll have them crush the enemy with overwhelming power.

"Ludwig! Have our troops retreat!"

Ludwig obeyed and had our soldiers pull back. Thanks to the enemy's slow movement speed, the gap between the armies widened.

My order had also served as a signal for the Verdant Wind sisters, who started to activate their spells. As we slowed down the enemy advance by showering them with arrows, clouds began to gather above them.

I saw Baron Dulac panic. He mustn't have expected someone able to cast an advanced spell in a rural barony like mine.

"Thunder Rain."

Countless lightning bolts rained down on Baron Dulac's army like a downpour. Those hit directly were scorched and collapsed, while the ones nearby were electrocuted, making them drop their shields and spears. Unfortunately, because they were strengthening

themselves with mana, none died, though they were seriously injured and wouldn't be able to fight properly anymore.

"Keep shooting until they're wiped out!" Ludwig commanded, and my soldiers resumed their volleys of arrows. Unable to move after the magic attack, the enemy had no means to dodge or block the projectiles as they pierced their throats and stomachs, killing them one after another. "Drop your bows and draw your weapons!"

Just when I thought it would take another two or three volleys to kill them all, Ludwig had my men stop. I soon realized why—Baron Dulac's elite troops had started to cross the bridge in teams of three. They were spreading out to avoid being taken out all at once by the Verdant Wind sisters' magic.

Then I guess we'll have to clash head-on.

"Raaaaaah!" My soldiers charged forward with a battle cry.

At first, they cut down the soldiers who had been immobilized by the lightning spell; then once Baron Dulac's elite forces arrived, the real battle began. Both armies seemed to be around the same in terms of skill. The enemy had superior numbers and equipment, but our momentum evened the odds.

"Should I join in?" Adele asked. If she did, we would gain the advantage.

I hesitated a little. I wanted to minimize casualties, so having her enter the fray and turn the tide in our favor would be a good move. She was more than capable of doing so with the Twin Hydra Blades. But what if there was another unit waiting, aiming for an ambush? I wasn't sure I would be able to deal with them by myself. The Verdant Wind sisters were nearby, but close combat wasn't their thing. They mainly fought at long range, so I risked being dragged into any magic they used.

If I died, Baron Dulac's victory would be assured. I had to reinforce our defenses. I decided to trust Ludwig and the soldiers to take care of the front and focused on our back.

"No, I'm wary of an ambush. Can you pick up the sounds around us to see if people are coming our way?"

"I shall try." From the look on her face, I supposed that she was worried that she wouldn't be able to do it because of all the battle

noises. She closed her eyes, and her dog ears twitched, but she quickly stopped. "I cannot hear anything."

"Keep trying just in case."

"Understood." She focused on her ears once again.

I patted her head and turned toward the battleground. It was hard to say which army was winning, as neither side was gaining a clear advantage.

I observed them, my arms folded, until Adele eventually called my name.

"Master Jack. I can hear horses behind us."

"What?!" I turned around, and indeed, an enemy unit of five men in metal armor on horseback was coming our way. They clearly weren't soldiers of my army.

"Should we attack them?" Olivia asked, readying her bow.

"Preserve your mana and shoot them to death with arrows."

"That's a pretty violent order," Olivia complained about my wording, but she still obeyed. Lily followed, but both of their arrows were repelled by the enemy's swords.

No normal soldier could cut down arrows while on horseback. They were likely highly skilled men—the cream of the crop among the elite. Four of them headed toward the Verdant Wind sisters—I couldn't help them, so they would have to survive on their own—and the last one charged straight at us.

"Can you deal with him, Adele?"

"Of course."

"Good reply. I'll help you a little," I said. *"Shadow Bind."*

The horse's shadow sprouted from the ground and restrained its legs. Living beings often neglected their footing when running, so it didn't even resist and collapsed easily. However, the man riding it jumped before he could be dragged into the fall and safely landed on the ground.

I threw a quick glance at the Verdant Wind sisters, who had started their fight against the other four enemies, and focused back on the man approaching me as he readied his shield.

"I am Matteo, Baron Dulac's heir! I shall have your head, Baron Girard!" he shouted. I didn't think he was lying about his name—he

had no reason to. From what I had heard of his strength, I guessed he was the most suitable man for the job of ambushing me.

"I'm Jack, House Girard's patriarch. Someone like you will never be able to kill me, but I don't mind letting you live if you surrender. What will you do?"

Naturally, he ignored my kind offer.

"Die!" Matteo closed the few meters distance between us in a single step, but I didn't move, my arms still folded.

Adele put herself between us and parried his sword with her Twin Hydra Blades, causing Matteo to lose his balance. He tried to step back, but I wasn't going to let him.

"Shadow Bind." I coiled his shadow around his legs.

"Damn it!" He quickly destroyed his restraints, but I had bought enough time.

Adele had the Twin Hydra Blades produce poison and swung them at Matteo. I had thought her timing to be perfect, but he managed to defend with his shield just in time. Fearing a counterattack, Adele leaped back.

Matteo stayed behind his shield, observing us without attacking recklessly.

"What's up? You're scared now? Where's all your energy gone?" I tried provoking him, but it didn't work. He wasn't like the other incompetent soldiers—he was calm and composed. The fact that he had managed to withstand Adele's attack proved that he wasn't an opponent to take lightly.

I shot another glance at the Verdant Wind sisters. They had thrown their bows away and were now fighting with rapiers. It seemed they had the advantage for now, but nothing was certain. However, even if they won their battle, it would likely take time, so I couldn't expect their help.

"Can I leave the fight to you?"

"Of course," Adele replied vigorously. I gave her a light tap on the back, conveying my expectations for a performance worthy of the strongest character, and her dog ears twitched happily. Then she blurred and vanished from my sight. She was so fast you could think she had teleported as she suddenly appeared to Matteo's right and

swung her Twin Hydra Blades.

Matteo had lost sight of Adele just like me and hastily rolled to the side to dodge. Adele tried to deliver the coup de grâce and stab him, but he released a shock wave from his shield. Being lightweight, Adele was blown a dozen meters away. The shield must have been endowed with magic.

"I'm shouldering the fate of my house—as if a mere beastfolk could win against me!" Matteo yelled at Adele, who had landed after somersaulting.

So he's racist, huh? Some people—be they humans, elves, dwarves, or beastfolk—thought that their race was the best. Even if the other party was a noble, they would reject everything about them if they were of a different race. And sometimes, that created openings. *Like, seriously, you had a golden opportunity to attack, so why didn't you strike?*

"I've shown something disgraceful to Master Jack... I must kill him at all costs," Adele said, releasing all the mana of her mana-storing organs. Her eyes were so dark and full of bloodlust that even I felt a chill, so naturally, Matteo was greatly intimidated.

There's no way you could have been able to predict the shock wave, so you don't need to care so much about being blown away, I commented in my mind.

"No, *I* am going to—" Matteo didn't have the time to finish his sentence as Adele went around his shield and swung the Twin Hydra Blades at his back. He somehow managed to turn around and block the strikes with his sword.

Their blades locked, and a metallic grinding sound echoed as they pushed at each other. They were on par at first, but Adele gradually pushed him back. Realizing he would lose in strength, Matteo tried to move his shield with his left hand.

As if I'd let you!

"Shadow Bind."

Unfortunately, he had seen me use the spell twice already, so he easily resisted, and I couldn't stop him from shield bashing Adele's face. However, she endured the blow and threw away one of her swords, grabbing the shield instead before Matteo could release a

shock wave.

"I won't lose!" she shouted, somehow managing not to be blown away, only using the strength of her fingers. All the while, she continued to push against Matteo's sword with the other Hydra Blade in her left hand. The shock wave had torn her skin, and blood trickled from her forehead and her arms. The rest of her body was likely not unscathed either, and the pain had to be intense. Yet she didn't waver.

Adele let out a battle cry, and at the same time, Matteo's sword broke. She had won thanks to her drive and the quality of her weapon. The sword continued its course and cut through the metal armor, digging into Matteo's right shoulder. The wound wasn't fatal, but it was enough to pour the hydra's poison into him.

Matteo let out an unintelligible scream. His eyes went red from the toxin, and he cried tears of blood.

Adele pulled out the Hydra Blade from his shoulder, rotated it into a reverse grip, then prepared to finish him off.

"Wait," I said. She stopped immediately. Despite having gone on a rampage, she hadn't lost her reason. She was a truly capable woman.

I walked over to Matteo, drawing the Vampire Sword.

"You coward... How dare you use poison?!" Matteo complained.

"Because having a lesser earth dragon assault my territory isn't unfair? You should learn to tell better jokes."

He shut up, unable to talk back. As he lost his strength because of the poison, he let go of his shield and his broken sword.

"You know what? I'm gonna tell you a little secret before you die," I said, grabbing Matteo by the hair and turning his face toward the Verdant Wind sisters. The both of them had just finished defeating their enemies and were rejoicing over their victory, out of breath. "See the two elves? They're the hero's comrades. You know what that means, right?"

"What? But Count Belmond said that the hero was aiming for your domain..."

So they didn't know that was a misunderstanding, huh? That explained why they hadn't expected that the Verdant Wind sisters

would help me. How foolish of them.

"You were deceived."

Matteo gasped.

"Just think about it. Why would the hero want the demesne of a mere rural baron like me?"

"That's... But I heard that the hero was investigating the Girard barony..."

"And who told you that? Did they prove it?"

"...No. We just believed what Count Belmond told us..."

They must have been manipulated with empty promises. What a foolish family—if they had acted more carefully, they could have lived longer.

"The hero and Count Belmond cooperated. They spread rumors to draw out the nobles who would throw the kingdom into mayhem."

"What?!"

"In other words, the target's not my domain—it's yours." I sneered at him in provocation.

"Damn you, Count Belmond!" Because of the poison muddling his thoughts, Matteo didn't realize that the hero wouldn't normally help in a small fight between rural barons, and kept expressing his resentment against Count Belmond while vomiting blood, not doubting my words for a second. He would meet a futile death, wallowing in hatred, grief, and despair—a fitting end for one of the scoundrels who had targeted my fief.

Serves you right.

"Even if I die and lose my body, my grudge won't fade! I'll curse your entire bloodline to death! O, soldiers and their families who fell in the Girard territory—let's take revenge together!" Matteo declared. He finally collapsed after throwing up one more glob of blood.

"Finally dead." His last moment had been as miserable as mine in my past life. Because of that, even though I should have been glad in victory, I only felt empty.

"Master Jack..." I must have seemed rather gloomy because Adele looked at me worriedly. I patted her head, which made her close her eyes happily, and that eased my heart a little.

"Are you all right?" I asked.

"Yes. Such small injuries will not be enough to stop me from fighting."

Now that we had taken care of the ambush, I didn't think there was a need to worry about our rear anymore. It was unlikely that Baron Dulac had another unit available for that, considering the size of his army. This meant that it was now my turn to go on the offensive—by sending Adele in the front.

"Drink this and go defeat Baron Dulac's men." I had brought a fifth-grade and a fourth-grade healing potion with me and took out the latter. It was a precious item that could instantly heal shallow injuries, and it was the only one in my entire domain. I had planned to only use it in case I was near death, but if I wanted to win against Baron Dulac, then it was better to use it on Adele.

"Can I truly use such a valuable potion?"

I nodded and pushed it against her chest, ordering her to drink it with my gaze. Adele hesitated for a few seconds but eventually gave in.

"My life belongs to you, Master Jack," she declared, removing the bottle's cap and downing the potion in one gulp. Her bleeding immediately stopped. "The pain is gone." She lightly hopped in place to check the state of her body, then she went to pick up the other half of the Twin Hydra Blades that she had thrown earlier. "I shall join the fight, then."

"Come back alive."

"Yes!" Adele replied cheerfully and rushed over to the battlefield. With that, we should get the advantage.

"Can we consider our job done?" Olivia asked now that it was only the Verdant Wind sisters and me.

"You don't want to join the melee?"

"We're not that good at using swords. Also"—she pointed at Adele rampaging on the battlefront—"do you even need us?"

Heads flew every time she swung her Twin Hydra Blades, and the enemy gradually retreated until, eventually, their formation collapsed and they ran away to the other side of the bridge. Even Baron Dulac, who had been watching until now, joined them in the escape. He fled on foot without even boarding his carriage, so it shouldn't be

too difficult to catch up to him.

"No, I don't."

"Then we're done here. We're going back."

"Fine. Thanks for your help."

"You're welcome." Olivia waved her hand as she left with Lily. They must really not have cared about the outcome of the battle, as they didn't turn around even once before they got out of sight.

Now alone, I headed toward the battlefield. They had come to invade my territory—of course I wasn't going to let them flee without taking responsibility.

I crossed the bridge with Adele and my soldiers, ready to hunt down the survivors.

Baron Dulac's men were exhausted and slow, and there was nowhere to hide in the meadow, so we easily caught up to them.

"Let's kill them all!" shouted one of my soldiers. Having witnessed the deaths of several of their comrades earlier, my men were pretty murderous. They chased after the enemies as though they wanted to put their heads in their comrades' tombs. Thankfully, I didn't plan to take prisoners.

Ludwig straddled a well-equipped soldier—likely the enemy captain—while his subordinates pinned him down, and he stabbed his face with a knife. Unfortunately for the soldier, he didn't die instantly.

"Gaaaah! It huuuurts!"

My soldiers grinned madly when they heard his scream. I didn't like it, but I stayed silent. They needed an outlet to relieve their stress, after all. Now they would be able to report to the tombs of their comrades that they had taken revenge for them.

"Stipe!" Baron Dulac halted, screaming the man's name. Perhaps they had been close? But he quickly resumed running when he noticed my approach. As expected of a noble, he was well trained and fast. He quickly got out of my sight while I dealt with enemy soldiers who attacked me.

"Can you find Baron Dulac for me?" I asked Adele, who was running along with me. I absolutely wanted him dead, so I couldn't let him escape!

"Yes, Master Jack!" she answered, acting calm and composed as usual. She was truly reliable. "Please follow me." She sniffed the air and increased her speed, running in front of me.

Adele followed his scent, but even after a while, we still hadn't caught up to him. We got deeper into the Dulac territory and entered a forest. It was only Adele and me now. We had been searching for a few hours, so I hesitated to suggest we take a rest, when suddenly, Adele halted and I bumped into her back.

"Did you find something?" I asked, moving to her side.

In front of us was Baron Dulac, glaring at us and out of breath. He must have thrown away his protective gear while running, as he wasn't wearing any. He did wield a battle-axe, though, so he was intending to fight. A maid was behind him, and I didn't like her eyes for some reason. Had he brought his mistress with him?

But none of this mattered compared to the person who was with them.

"Why are you here, Lady Seravimia?" My tone was polite, as we were in the presence of other people. Had she chosen to betray me and side with Baron Dulac because we had separated after a quarrel? That was possible. After all, my father was still alive, so she could access the ancient ruins with him instead of me.

"Don't glare at me like that," Seravimia said, grinning.

I just couldn't get a read on her. I readied the Vampire Sword, preparing for battle.

"I'm not here to fight," she continued—but I could hardly trust her. I glared at her, strengthening my body with mana. "I'm telling the truth! I'm here on an errand for the royal family!" She took the sword hanging at her waist and threw it on the ground to prove herself.

I still couldn't believe her entirely, but I decided to listen to what she had to say. "Why is the royal family interested in a feud between two rural barons?"

"Baron Dulac made a request to the royal family, and they sent a decree. I only learned about it yesterday when he received it. I was really surprised."

Tch, so he made preparations in case he lost. "Can you tell me

what this decree entailed?" If it was enough to move the hero, it had to conform to the kingdom's law. It shouldn't put me at a disadvantage, but I was curious about the details.

"It says—"

"Please, my lady. Allow me to be the one to tell him," interjected Baron Dulac, who had been silent until now. He held a parchment in front of him, showing its contents to me. "Hey, Girard brat. Are you aware of the dueling law for provincial lords?"

"Of course."

It was a law of the kingdom that obliged two lords—though only provincial ones—to settle disputes with a duel. Once the royal family had approved, you were forced to do it, and you couldn't have a representative stand for you. In short, it was a barbaric law that had the lords fight themselves and allowed the winner to take everything from the loser. And because it was the law, even Seravimia couldn't stop it.

"Then you know what that means—we are going to duel to see who is the most worthy to be a lord."

What he had said and the fact that Seravimia would act as a witness were written on the parchment. The crest of the royal family proved it wasn't counterfeit. It was neither a lie nor a joke—we were told to fight, just the two of us.

"Why is a duel necessary, Lady Seravimia?" I asked. "If the point is to prove our power as lords, then have I not proven mine already by almost winning against Baron Dulac's army?"

"Nope. You're still too influenced by your past common sense. What is demanded of provincial lords, who live in lands where there are more monsters than people, is to have enough power to crush others. That's it. How they govern their domains is just a bonus."

She was basically saying that I still thought like a Japanese person. I wouldn't be able to cancel this duel by convincing her. I had to finish off Baron Dulac with my own hands.

"Fine. Then I shall accept the duel."

"Master Jack!" Adele exclaimed, astonished.

"Don't worry. I'll win. So just watch quietly."

"...Then I shall believe in your victory." She didn't look satisfied,

but she would obey and wait until the end of the duel.

"It appears that Baron Girard is done on his side. What about you, Baron Dulac?" Seravimia asked.

"I am ready. I am not so weak that I would lose to the Girard brat." Having rested enough and regained his strength, Baron Dulac showed his intent to fight by swinging his battle-axe a few times.

"Well then, you can begin your duel. I won't allow anyone to interfere," Seravimia said, glancing at Adele and the maid. She took some distance from us.

That marked the start of the fight.

"Here I come!" Baron Dulac took a few steps forward and swung his battle-axe down at me. Its reach was a little longer than the Vampire Sword, so he would need to take another step forward to be within my range.

At first, I'd planned to close the distance, but the slowness of his attack bothered me. I decided to trust my hunch and backstepped to dodge. The next instant, the battle-axe gleamed, and the ground where I had been caved in a few centimeters.

It's endowed with magic! He had made it look like a normal attack, intending to crush me by surprise.

"I didn't expect you to notice my trap! You've got sharp instincts for a brat!" Baron Dulac shouted, continuing to swing his weapon around. A crushing effect had been added to it, which created an invisible attack radius around the blade. Just getting near it was risky.

"Protect." Baron Dulac's body shone faintly with a spell that increased his defense. I had often seen it in the game. I wasn't sure of its duration, but it'd likely last the entire duel. That put a stop to my plan to stab him and suck his blood to drain his stamina.

"What's the matter, brat?! Stop fleeing and fight me!"

"I will if you drop your weapon."

"Oh? Let's see if you're telling the truth, then!" Baron Dulac stopped his onslaught, and he leaped a few meters back. Then he stabbed his battle-axe into the ground and folded his arms, staring at me. His breath was a little ragged, but otherwise, he didn't seem fatigued. "See? I'm defenseless!"

He invited me to attack him. It might be a trap, but doing nothing would just let him recover his stamina. If I wanted to put an end to this duel, I needed to go on the offensive.

I closed the distance between us while carefully observing him. The ground was normal, and Baron Dulac didn't move as I got within the Vampire Sword's range. Not wanting to get closer than that, I thrust my blade at him—yet he still didn't move. The tip of my sword struck his head, but I felt a hard resistance and immediately retreated.

"That's it?" Baron Dulac asked. Despite my attack, there wasn't even a single drop of blood on his forehead. My thrust must not have been strong enough. I didn't expect *Protect* to be so powerful.

"Don't get cocky just because you've repelled my attack once." Though I said that, I was already using the mana from all of my mana-storing organs to strengthen myself, yet I hadn't been strong enough to cut through his head. That meant he would be able to defend against all of my attacks.

I took some distance from him and started to search for a solution.

"You're done already?" Baron Dulac asked with a composed grin—which pissed me off—but when he saw I wasn't in the mood to chitchat, he picked up his battle-axe. "You're such a boring kid. It makes my blood boil to think that my men lost to someone like you!"

The baron started to give off even more pressure. He must have increased his body strengthening to its limit.

The moment I thought he was going to attack, Baron Dulac vanished from my sight. I sensed bloodlust coming from my left and leaped forward. The next instant, a loud impact resonated behind me. I turned around, finding Baron Dulac and a small crater where his battle-axe had struck. He was using his weapon more like a hammer than an axe.

"Lucky dodge."

"Indeed, I'm luckier than a certain baron who's full of debts and on the brink of ruin."

"Shut up, you damn brat!"

He's got a really short temper, huh? He was so angry that blue

veins popped on his forehead as he swung his weapon again. Even though he had a lot of mana and a great weapon thanks to being a noble from a long lineage, he wasn't that skilled at combat. Or at least, he wasn't from my point of view as someone who trained with Adele.

I calmly searched for openings in his defense, and when I could, I stabbed at his neck and the joints of his thick arms.

"It's useless! There's no way you could break through my magic! Now, it's time for you to pay for my son's death!"

The Vampire Sword didn't manage to give him a single injury, so I decided to give up on the bloodsucking strategy.

"Die!" Baron Dulac swung his battle-axe down at me. Not knowing how large the invisible attack radius was, I jumped back far away from him. "Quit running away!" He was out of breath and didn't follow after me—he must have been getting tired.

"Shadow Walk." I sank into my shadow and emerged from Baron Dulac's cast behind him, striking with my sword. However, it was like hitting a lump of metal, and it only resulted in my arms feeling numb.

Baron Dulac turned around and kicked me in the stomach, which I was unable to avoid because I had just finished my attack. I was blown all the way to a tree, my back slamming against its trunk and forcing the air out of my lungs.

"Can't you learn? Your attacks are pointless."

"Shut up." I leaned on the tree as I stood up, calming down my breathing.

I had noticed something—even though his skin hardened like steel when I struck with the Vampire Sword, he could still move freely, which should be impossible as his joints shouldn't be able to bend. That meant *Protect* only activated when he was attacked. In that case, I just needed to find what the magic considered an attack, then I should be able to win!

"Break time is over. Time to finish you off!" Baron Dulac closed in the distance and swung his battle-axe at me.

I rolled to the side to dodge, and at the same time, I picked up a pebble and threw it at him. It hit his cheek, and he grimaced. Even

though he hadn't even blinked when I had thrust my sword at his face, he had felt pain from being hit by a mere pebble.

I think I know how it works.

Baron Dulac kept swinging his battle-axe, and I avoided every blow, waiting for an opportunity. Then finally, it came—I dodged a big swing, grabbed his arm, then swept his legs.

"Whoa?!" Baron Dulac fell on his back. He didn't appear to be hurt, nor did he cough from the impact, so *Protect* must have absorbed the blow.

Just as I thought.

I immediately followed by straddling the arm holding the battle-axe—then locking it with my legs, I slowly bent it in the opposite direction.

"S-Stop! That hurts!"

Finally, something I did had worked. This confirmed that *Protect*'s activation was based on the strength of the impact against the user's skin. If there wasn't one, it didn't activate. In that case, there were several ways to defeat him.

Baron Dulac dropped his weapon in pain. I released his arm and went for his neck instead. I trapped his body with my legs and began to strangle him. I had learned stranglehold techniques during my training with Adele. I knew how much strength I needed to put into my hold to not activate his magic, so while it would be slow, I was certain I would be able to choke him.

"Sh-Shtop..."

"Never. Regret targeting my domain as you die." Or so I said, but I was only bluffing. I needed him alive to ask what he had done and gather evidence. If I were lucky, I might find something that could incriminate Count Belmond. If I could take care of a count, the other nobles wouldn't be able to look down on me anymore and should stop bothering me.

Baron Dulac's complexion worsened. The strength in his limbs was fading, his resistance weakening.

"Just a little more, Master Jack!" Adele cheered, hopping up and down excitedly. When I smiled at her, her tail swayed furiously from happiness.

"Don't...gill...me..." He begged for his life, but I only increased the strength in my arms until, eventually, he foamed at the mouth and fainted. The faint light coming from his body vanished, so *Protect* must have deactivated. Now, even normal weapons should be able to hurt him.

I released his neck and looked at Seravimia. "Do you agree that I have won the duel?"

"Of course. You have proven your strength as a lord. If anyone complains about the result, then I will pay them a visit," she replied.

"This is very reassuring." As I confirmed my victory, I heard wet coughing from behind me. I turned around and found Baron Dulac vomiting blood as he was stabbed in the chest by his maid.

"You seem curious to know why I did this," she said to Baron Dulac, who had woken up from the pain, his face stained with blood. "Detlef was my lover."

Baron Dulac gasped.

"After throwing him in the dungeon as you had ordered, I treated him in secret, but he died just before you started your march."

I didn't get the details, but apparently, Baron Dulac had killed the maid's lover, and she bore quite the grudge. She had been waiting for an opportunity to take her revenge, and this had been the perfect moment for her betrayal.

Baron Dulac's mouth flapped as he went deathly pale from the blood loss. He gradually lost his strength and passed away, leaving the expressionless maid alone next to him. To avenge her lover, she had continued to serve Baron Dulac, whom she hated, just to betray him at the very last moment. What a frightening woman.

"How do you feel?" I asked her.

"I thought I would feel refreshed, but I actually feel terrible."

Taking revenge could bring closure, but it couldn't bring back what was lost. For some people, that would be enough to move forward, but that wasn't the case for the maid—she wanted to join her lover in death. Or at least, that was how she looked to me.

"I am grateful to you, Baron Girard," she said, gazing at me with empty eyes.

"Why?"

"It is thanks to you cornering this trash that I was able to dispose of him."

While commoners also possessed mana, nobles had far more and were more used to employing it. With such a difference in their abilities, coupled with *Protect*, there was no way the maid would have been able to murder Baron Dulac under normal circumstances. If I hadn't made him faint, she would never have been able to avenge her lover.

"I see," I replied, then pointed the Vampire Sword at the maid. Killing an aristocrat was a capital crime. Even more so for a servant murdering their master. According to the laws of the kingdom, the punishment was to put the criminal's entire family to death. Even children knew of it, so of course the maid should too. "Do you have any family?"

She didn't answer, so I took her silence as an affirmation. I would need to investigate later.

"Have you prepared yourself?"

"Yes. I apologize for the trouble I have caused you, Baron Girard." She bowed respectfully.

If her lover hadn't been killed, she would have stayed an obedient maid. From the way she talked and moved, I understood that she was well educated, which was impressive for a commoner. And that must have been why I saw a little of Lumié in her. If I had treated Ludwig like Baron Dulac had treated his maid's lover, Lumié might have betrayed and killed me too. I couldn't think of what had happened to her as unrelated to my own situation.

"You're a foolish woman. You could just have let me kill him," I said.

"I know. But I wanted to murder him with my own hands." Her tone was dispassionate, but I could feel that she was telling the truth.

A woman who lives for love, huh? Her faithfulness is completely different from my past life's ex-wife. That made me like her, and I felt like the feeling would only grow as we talked. Was I once again affected by Jack's womanizing tendencies?

"Master Jack!" shouted a voice. It was Ludwig. I had spent too

much time talking, and my soldiers had caught up to us.

"What?"

"Do you truly need to kill the maid too?" he asked, staring at me nervously. Maybe he was just like me—he saw some of his sister in the maid and didn't want her to die.

"I have to. Didn't you see her—" I stopped mid-sentence, realizing something—the only witnesses to Baron Dulac's death were Adele, Seravimia, and me. No one else could possibly know who'd plunged the knife into him.

So if we don't tell anyone what happened, she can live.

"Master Jack?" said Ludwig. He found my sudden silence odd.

"No, it's nothing."

I had two choices.

The first was to kill the maid in accordance with the kingdom's laws, but that would leave a bad impression. Even if I was in the right, Ludwig wouldn't like it.

The second was to let her live. People would see me as a compassionate lord, but that meant allowing a traitor to live.

It was a hard choice to make. No matter which one I went with, it wouldn't be perfect anyway, so maybe I should just let her decide her own fate. If she was the one to say she wanted to die, my soldiers wouldn't think I had killed her for no reason.

Yeah, let's go with that.

"This would be unthinkable under normal circumstances, but I'll give you a choice—do you want to live or not?"

She didn't answer. She was hesitating.

"Give your reply now," I ordered her.

"I am responsible for Baron Dulac's—"

"Baron Dulac has nothing to do with my question. Just answer me—do you want to live or not?" I stopped her before she could finish her sentence, or else I would have had to kill her. I wouldn't mind, but I didn't want my words to become lies.

"...I want to visit my lover's tomb and tell him what has happened. So if possible, I wish to live until then at least," she said, crying.

Now that I had her answer, I didn't need to kill her anymore. I

sheathed the Vampire Sword and turned toward Ludwig. “Take her. If you find other noncombatants, capture them. I’m the one who’ll decide their fate, so don’t kill them.”

“Understood.” Ludwig took the maid and left with his subordinates.

“Adele.”

“Yes, Master Jack.”

“Forget about what you saw earlier and go check if there are enemy survivors nearby.”

“But...” Adele glanced at Seravimia. I understood her concern, but I needed to speak with Seravimia alone.

“It’s an order. Just obey.”

“Understood.” While dissatisfied, Adele obeyed my command and left to search for Baron Dulac’s soldiers. It saved me some trouble that she was so obedient.

Now, it was only Seravimia and me.

“You helped Baron Dulac to have a talk with me, right?” I asked, my tone more casual now that we were alone. Being surprised by the sudden decree of the royal family was likely the truth, but she could have refused to be the witness. And yet she had accepted, so it was natural to think that she wanted to speak with me after the duel.

“You figured that out quickly.”

“We’ve known each other for a while now. It was an easy guess.”

“Yeah! Of course you’d understand me!” Seravimia rejoiced. My words must have triggered something, because she hopped in place excitedly, staring at me with sparkling eyes. That was kinda scary. “I knew you were special, Baron Girard.”

I was going to quip back, but I stopped myself in time. I couldn’t disagree with her and anger her like last time. I had to be careful in how I treated her.

“Say, you really don’t want to go to the ancient ruins with me?” she asked. “Let’s create a perfect world together.”

“Just what is that perfect world you talk about?”

“I want to destroy this world and its soulless dolls to replace them with true people.”

So, like, she wants to create a world different from the game? Why does she want to do something so troublesome?

"By soulless dolls, do you mean the characters appearing in the game?"

"Well, mostly. They're acting just like I designed them—totally incapable of change. Can you really say they're people with souls?"

I somehow understood where she was coming from. I was wary of Kevin and Lumié because they betrayed Jack in the game, and I sometimes couldn't help thinking that Adele was just like her character, with how her trauma was the same as established in her backstory.

But Seravimia was wrong. True, parts of them were similar to the game, but that was it—just parts. At first, yeah, they had been like Seravimia had designed them. But as I interacted with them, I realized that they thought, laughed, and cried just like normal people. They had feelings, and with time, they would change. Adele, who was doing her best to conquer her trauma, and Lumié, who continued to serve me even after witnessing me trying to kill my parents, were proof of that. Even the Verdant Wind sisters should be different from how Seravimia had designed them because of the different experiences they had gone through. The fact that Seravimia had failed to notice that meant that she had either only built a shallow relationship with them, or that she just hadn't made an effort to know more about them.

"I don't think the same. They're just like us; they have souls too." It was the one thing I couldn't compromise on.

"Why can't you understand me?!"

"Because I've seen them live like normal people. On the contrary, why don't *you* understand that?"

"I told you! Because they can't act differently from the game!"

"They can," I declared.

"No, they can't!"

"I'm telling you they can. Julianne is a good example. She's doing her best to learn embroidery and manners every day. Are you saying that was how you had designed her?"

Seravimia fell silent. That proved she hadn't expected Julianne to

act that way. I kind of wished I could show her Julianne, her eyes empty as she tried her best to change.

"Do you understand that I'm telling the truth now?" I said.

"No. You're lying!"

"Calm down! I'm not lying!"

"I don't believe you! *I'm* the one who's right!"

She was way too stubborn. I sighed, annoyed by the fact she just wouldn't listen to me.

However, Seravimia didn't like that. She furrowed her brow and glared at me, tears welling up in her eyes. "You're such a blockhead, Baron Girard!" she shouted, drawing her sword. The blade was invisible, so its reach was hard to grasp. "I'm going to cut your legs so you can't flee, and then I'll explain all this to you again and again until you understand me!"

She must have released all of her mana, because I felt far more pressure coming from her than ever before. Baron Dulac was a joke compared to her. There was no way I could win.

Lightning arrows appeared around her, pointing my way.

"So we're fighting in the end..."

"It's all your fault, Baron Girard!" Seravimia yelled, firing the lightning arrows at me.

I ran to the right, escaping them as they stabbed the ground where I had been. Seravimia could create as many lightning arrows as she wanted, though, and she just kept firing at me. If I stopped running, I'd get hit. I tried hiding behind a tree, but it caught fire after being pierced by a dozen lightning arrows.

The main problem isn't their power, though. It's that she basically has an infinite number of them. At this rate, I'm gonna get exhausted before long.

"Shadow Walk." I sank into the tree's shadow, then emerged from one cast by a different tree, a dozen meters behind her. I didn't even try to attack her; I knew it would likely fail.

"Playing hide-and-seek?" Seravimia said, then she swung her invisible blade horizontally. The next instant, all the trees near her collapsed as she cut them through. The sharpness of her sword was truly terrifying. Wearing armor was basically meaningless against it.

Seravimia walked around, searching for me and gradually approaching my location. Despite the dread I felt at my current situation, I still managed some comfort knowing that she at least wasn't planning to kill me. But that could change on a whim, so I couldn't let my guard down.

"I'm at my limit, so please come out," she said with tears in her voice. She seemed to be telling the truth.

My soldiers and Adele weren't too far from here, so I had to settle things before they could notice what was happening. Cheap tricks wouldn't work—I had to fight her head-on.

I used mana to strengthen my body to its limits. My blood flow quickened, and my muscles hurt when I ran, but I didn't stop. I charged at Seravimia, who was crying while laughing, and thrust the Vampire Sword at her. She easily parried it with her invisible blade and counterattacked with a punch. I tilted my head to the side to avoid it, and not wanting to create distance between us, I stepped forward.

"Take that!" I kneed her stomach. My full-force blow broke her armor but did nothing to her body.

"You're too weak to beat me!" Seravimia lightly thrust me away with her hand, creating some distance between us. Then she followed with a kick to my chest, blowing me away and scattering pieces of my breastplate around as I rolled across the ground and slammed into a tree.

I tried to stand up but couldn't as I coughed violently. No matter how much I breathed, it felt like no oxygen entered my lungs. My entire body was drenched in cold sweat, and my chest hurt like crazy. She'd probably broken a few of my ribs. Still, with pure grit, I somehow managed to move my head and look at Seravimia—who was swinging her sword at me, aiming for my neck.

"Shadow Walk." I sank into the tree's shadow just in time, and her sword stabbed the ground instead. If I had been even a second later, I'd be dead.

I emerged from Seravimia's shadow and pressed against her back, locking her in a firm hold. "Calm...down... Let's...talk..."

"Why should we? We can't even understand each other!"

Good, it's working. If she had really been uninterested in talking, she would have attacked me. Now, I just needed to soothe her.

"Aren't you...jumping...to conclusions...?"

"What do you mean?"

"We haven't known...each other...for long... Don't we need time...to get to know...each other...more?"

"We're connected by fate, we don't need time!"

Enough time had passed for Seravimia to have at least created two games in her past life, so it would be natural to think that she had died in her adulthood, yet she was acting like a child. Her mental age didn't match how long she had lived. I should exploit that to persuade her.

"You just...said fate...right?"

"Yep. We're fated to be together, Baron Girard."

I was getting dizzy, and it wasn't just because of the pain of my broken ribs. Why did I have to lower myself to the same standpoint as a dreaming girl?

"Then...how about testing...the power of our fate?"

"What do you mean?"

Depending on the listener, the meaning of "the power of fate" changed. A normal adult would find it stupid and ignore me, but Seravimia, with her childish mind, was different. I'd gotten her attention.

"Let's make a bet...and test that power."

"I don't get it. Explain." Seravimia was so befuddled that she stopped resisting my hold.

Thank God. I was reaching my limit. I let her go and sat on the ground. I stayed silent, regulating my breathing as I drank a potion. Its grade was lower than the one I had given to Adele, and it wouldn't do much, but I felt the pain recede a little. I should be able to talk normally now.

"I'll use the power of fate to release the people around me from the game's setting. For the next year, you will observe them and see if they truly can't change. If you ever think that they are people with souls, I win. If you don't change your opinion that they're dolls, then you win."

This time, I'd used the term "power of fate" to describe the power of altering the fates of other people. Basically, I had declared I would use it to change the fates—or rather, the behaviors and thoughts—of the people around me. As I had said earlier, Julianne was already changing, and Adele and Lumié were also showing signs, so I was almost guaranteed to win.

"What will you do if I win?" Seravimia asked.

"I'll go to the ancient ruins with you."

"Really?"

"I promise."

"You're not lying?"

"You don't need to pester me like that! I hate people who break their promises."

"Can I stay near you until then?"

"Of course. In fact, I'll need you to so it's easier to meet with you. After all, I need to show you my progress to win the bet!"

The tears that had been welling up in Seravimia's eyes finally spilled over, trickling down her cheeks and falling to the ground. Despite crying loudly, she looked like she was laughing. That was quite adroit of her.

"I'm so glad you don't hate me!" she shouted, weeping. Our conversation had been about creating a perfect world and people being like dolls, so why was that her first reaction? "As long as you keep your promise, I'll do my best!"

The reason she'd rejoiced so much was likely because she was relieved that I—the only person other than her who had a past life—hadn't forsaken her. It wasn't weird for someone to feel glad to have someone with whom they could talk about their homeland when living in a foreign country. Even I felt the same. Perhaps that was why I couldn't hate her completely, despite all the troubles she caused me.

"But don't get the wrong idea. My promise is only to go with you to the ruins. I won't help you destroy the world."

"That's fine. I'll just give it to you as a present!"

"I don't want it!" Far from only giving me half of the world like a typical evil mastermind, she wanted to give me everything.

"Ha ha, I'm kidding!" Seravimia laughed, wiping her tears. The way she kept switching from one emotion to another really made me feel like I was talking to a child. *You're an adult, so act like one.*

Now in a good mood, Seravimia energetically stood up and sheathed her sword. She started to walk away, but after a few steps she stopped and turned back. "Ah, a little late, but congratulations on your victory. I never doubted you'd win."

"Thanks." *Though the duel wouldn't have happened if you hadn't been present in the first place. You should reflect on what you did.*

"Not only has Baron Dulac lost his duel, but he has also disturbed the peace of the kingdom, so there is no doubt that he'll be stripped of his title. Moreover, all of his relatives will be exiled to remote regions, which aren't really fit for people who lived in luxury their whole lives. So they'll probably all die before long."

Enticed by the royal family and Count Belmond, Baron Dulac had ended up crippled with debts to the point of no return, and now he was being cut off like a lizard's tail. Having ambitions beyond his means had brought his downfall. He should have been like me, living a life suitable to his status, instead of dreaming big.

"Then what'll happen to his domain?" I asked. If all of Baron Dulac's relatives were going to be exiled and become commoners, then House Dulac would die. That meant someone else would need to govern his land instead.

"Say, Baron Girard."

"What?"

"Do you want the Dulac territory?"

To be honest, it was a tempting offer. More land meant more taxes, which meant I'd be able to live in as much luxury as a baron living near the capital. But it wasn't all good. After all, the people of the Dulac fief likely hated me. True, I hadn't plundered them, but I had killed the soldiers who were their families. So emotionally speaking, they wouldn't accept me. I didn't think they would revolt, but it was almost certain that it would lead to more troubles in the future, which wasn't worth the slight increase in luxury I'd get.

The Girard territory still had plenty of unexploited areas, and there were other ways to increase the taxes. I would rather avoid

being overambitious and bringing my own downfall like Baron Dulac.

"I'd prefer money," I replied.

"Even though you could get the Dulac territory so easily?"

"It'd only lead to my ruin."

Seravimia liked my answer and grinned. In *Survival Strategies of a Corrupt Aristocrat*, if you tried to become a viscount and expanded the Girard domain too much, you'd bring your own downfall. Seravimia was likely satisfied that I hadn't chosen that path.

"I like how you do things differently from the game," she said. I ignored her flirt, not feeling the need to react, and pressed her to continue with my eyes. "You could play along... I'll have House Dulac's relatives pay you a large sum of money, so could you treat me more kindly?"

"I'm pretty kind already. How much is a large sum?" There were the repairs of my mansion, the condolence money for the families of my soldiers who had died, the military costs, and the reward I had promised for our victory, among other things, so I was going to need a lot of money. I wouldn't be able to cover everything with the tax yields, so what I would do next greatly depended on how much she'd give me.

"Well, if we gather all of their assets, I think it should amount to about ten thousand gold coins," Seravimia guessed.

"And I'd receive it all?"

"Yep. I'll persuade the king just for you," she said, clearly trying to make me owe her, but my mind was focused on something else—I could make great progress in restoring my demesne with ten thousand gold coins! "Ah, before I forget. I got a little selfish and managed to have the royal family grant two of my requests."

I did my best not to let my face twitch. I was certain I wasn't going to like this. But even if I didn't want to hear more, Seravimia just kept talking.

"The first is to let me stop my work as the hero for a while. I'll be able to live freely for a few years."

The hero's job was to monitor nobles and punish them if needed, and nobody else was allowed to do that. If Seravimia took a break, then aristocrats were going to be able to do whatever they wanted.

Of course, no one was dumb enough to turn against the royal family, but harassment and skirmishes between domains, like Baron Dulac had done to me, were going to happen more often.

"I'm surprised the royal family accepted."

"Well, I kind of overworked and incurred the enmity of quite a few nobles, so the royal family actually wants me to take a break."

"Ah, I get it now." Basically, the stick had been used too much without carrots. The nobles were getting stressed from being monitored too intensely, and things might get a little dangerous if they had continued like that. I wouldn't be surprised if the king made Seravimia's break look like a punishment for doing whatever she pleased. "The royal family must have happily agreed to it, then."

"Yep. They were polite and all, but deep down, I'm sure they were glad to get rid of me."

So even the royal family found her annoying, huh?

"In that case, they should just abolish that stupid hero system."

"I think they would if they didn't need to be wary of other nations. Especially the Grand Kingdom of Gradia."

The Grand Kingdom of Gradia was more than five times larger than the Valzza Kingdom, and the nation with which Jack cooperated if you chose the path to destroy the Valzza Kingdom. Thanks to her overwhelming power, Seravimia could easily kill the Gradian king, which served as a deterrent. That was why the existence of the hero was so important, and the royal family was forced to keep the system.

"Makes sense. What about your other request?"

I understood the royal family's feeling of wanting the hero to exist but not do anything. Unfortunately for them, Seravimia wasn't that obedient. Our time together might have been short, but I knew that she was shrewd enough to use other people's intentions to accomplish her objectives.

"I asked to become the lord of a domain."

"Wait! Are you going to...?!"

"Yep. I'm going to ask for the Dulac territory. The king is kind, so I'm sure he'll accept."

That was it! She had known I would win against Baron Dulac and

refuse to expand my demesne from the start! Planning to live next to me all the while!

Well, considering our bet, it wasn't a bad thing. In fact, it was pretty useful. But I had almost died twice by her hand, so a part of me wanted her to live far away from me.

"We're going to be neighbors from now on. Let's get along," she said.

"Of course."

As long as I kept a cordial relationship with Seravimia, no noble should try to attack me. They wouldn't want to catch her attention while she was playing at being a lord, after all. They would monitor her but leave her—and me, by extension—alone to keep her off the front stage. Putting my personal feelings on the matter aside, that was perfect for me. I wanted to focus on restoring my demesne.

"I'll be making full use of your influence," I said.

"We're fated for each other, Baron Girard. You can use it as much as you like."

We shook hands, sealing our agreement.

It's going to take some time for Seravimia to completely take over the Dulac territory, so hopefully I'll be at peace for a while.

Epilogue: The Official Lord of the Girard Territory

Besides the torture room, there was only one prison to detain criminals in my entire domain. And, as one might expect, it was underground and very unsanitary. Mold grew everywhere because of the humidity, and sitting on the cold stone floor would cause most people to fall ill in about a week. It would become quite the scandal if this were modern Japan. Sometimes, drunkards who needed to reflect were thrown into it, and other times, it was murderers waiting for their execution.

It was a place for criminals and guarded by my soldiers, so a noble like me should never have to step foot there, but I had a reason to this time.

I borrowed a lantern from a guard and descended the stairs underground together with Gwynt. As I heard the sound of our heels clacking on the stone stairs, it really sank in that I was in the prison of *Survival Strategies of a Corrupt Aristocrat*. In the game, you could get into it after capturing enemies in battle, and you'd get options such as torture or rape to force the prisoners to give intel. Naturally, as a game rated 15+, the actual events weren't shown, but that was enough for the player to imagine what happened. If I had played the game in my teens, it might have given me a weird fetish.

We continued our descent as I immersed myself in my memories, until we eventually reached the lowest floor. A narrow corridor spread before us, with iron bars lined up at regular intervals on both sides—prison cells. Morbid curiosity made me point my lantern toward the nearest cell. Inside was a man lying on the floor, his face disfigured by a deep burn.

"Eek!" Gwynt yelped and clung to my back.

I silently pulled him off, which made him lose his balance and fall on his butt. “What are you doing? Let’s go.”

“Of c-course!” Gwynt hurriedly stood up, but he fell again, face-first this time, his rear pointing toward the ceiling.

It would be a waste of time to say anything, so I left the klutz behind and continued alone.

At first, the cells were inhabited by injured inmates lying on the floor, but more of them were mobile as I advanced into the prison, and they grabbed the iron bars of their cells, pleading for their release. There were cells containing men and women together, but the stench of urine and excrement was so strong that it seemed they couldn’t even become aroused enough to get frisky.

As I slowly walked through the corridor, Gwynt caught up to me.

There were a little more than fifty cells, and almost all of them were in use. Most were prisoners of war, though, so they would get vacated once we were done dealing with the aftermath of the conflict.

After several minutes, we finally arrived at our destination—cell number sixty-one. I illuminated it with my lantern. Inside was a woman with iron balls chained to her ankles—Media the traitor.

I only learned the details after returning to my mansion, but Media was the head maid of House Dulac. She was a truly capable woman, and Baron Dulac had apparently been relying on her quite a lot. After letting her visit her lover’s tomb and hesitating about how to deal with her, I ended up throwing her in jail.

In the few days since our last meeting, she had become quite grimy and worn. She had dark circles under her eyes, and her cheeks were sunken, showing that she hadn’t slept or eaten properly for a while.

Media looked at me, her eyes narrowed, likely because she was dazzled by the light. “Is that you, Baron Girard...?”

“Yeah. I’m here to give you your punishment.”

“Huh?” She was befuddled, which I understood. After all, a noble like me wouldn’t usually come inside the prison. However—maybe it was because I was in the body of the womanizer Jack—I tended to be softer and more lenient toward women, which was why I had

come here to bring her an opportunity for survival.

"Just like last time, I'm giving you two choices. Choose the one you like."

It was an important conversation that would decide her fate, so Media only swallowed and stayed silent. She didn't interrupt me to ask a question and just obediently waited for me to talk—a good idea, since I was a noble. She truly was a capable maid.

"The first option is to be executed for killing an aristocrat. It's a serious crime, so don't expect a peaceful death. You and your family will be dismembered."

It was an execution method where the criminal had their limbs cut off with saws. It was so painful that even grown men screamed at the top of their lungs, and I heard some even peed themselves. It was a secret of mine that when it happened in the game, the male voice actor did such an amazing job that it traumatized me for a few days.

"If the first choice is death, then I suppose the second is different?" Media asked.

"Indeed. If you accept my deal, you'll be able to get out of here alive."

I knew it was risky to make a deal with a traitor. But it was something only Media could do, so I decided to use it to exempt her from execution.

"But what is the point of living without him...?"

"Dying is your choice, but remember that your family would be joining you."

Media glared at me. I had hit a nerve. Sensing danger in her attitude, Gwynt placed a hand on his shortsword's hilt, but I shot him a glance to stop him.

"Calm down. Just listen to what I have to say before making a decision," I said.

"Understood. Could you please tell me what you want from me, then?"

"The Dulac barony is going to get a new lord. I want you to monitor them and report what they do to me."

While I had managed to salvage my relationship with Seravimia

thanks to the bet we'd made, in the end, we were just using each other. And considering how she was easily swayed by her emotions, she might even betray me without realizing it. She always exceeded my expectations in a bad way, so I couldn't let my guard down. I needed someone to keep an eye on her.

"You want me, a mere maid, to become a spy?" Media asked, perplexed.

I understood her confusion. After all, normally, that was the kind of job I'd give to Gwynt. But he was a named character in the game, so Seravimia knew him. Heck, maybe she even knew some background information about him that only the creator could know. So it was too risky to let Gwynt near Seravimia. Instead, I'd use Media—a mob character.

Seravimia was going to be very busy taking over her new territory, so it was likely that she would rely heavily on Media, who had been Baron Dulac's head maid. And even if she didn't, I could still use Media's connections to the people working in the mansion. Moreover, even if Seravimia discovered that Media was a spy and killed her, it wouldn't be much of an issue for me, as she wasn't one of my soldiers.

For these reasons, it was very convenient for me to have her work as a spy for me.

"Do you have to go so far just to know how the new lord will act?" Media asked.

"Isn't it natural to be cautious of the neighboring lord?"

Hearing my sound argument, Media decided to change her line of questioning. "And what benefits do I get out of this deal?"

Just as I had hoped, she was interested in my offer. If she had truly wanted to die, she wouldn't be asking for details. Everything was progressing well so far.

"You think a criminal can ask for compensation for their work?" I couldn't rush the negotiations. To clearly show her that I was the one with the upper hand, I couldn't give her the answer she wanted immediately.

"I am fine with dying, but you are forcing me to live. Is it not my right to ask for compensation?"

Tch, she thinks she has the advantage. I needed to show her that she was wrong, or things wouldn't proceed as I wanted.

"Unlock the door," I ordered Gwynt. He was surprised by my sudden command, but he obeyed and used the key he had received from the prison's guard to open the cell's door. I slowly unsheathed the Vampire Sword as I entered the cell and stood before Media. "You seem to be misunderstanding something. Your death wouldn't trouble me in the slightest." I wasn't lying. I wanted more insurance against Seravimia, but it wasn't an absolute necessity. "In fact, I wouldn't mind executing you right here, right now."

I placed my blade on her shoulder. I would only need to push it to the side and cut her neck to suck her blood.

I thought the intimidation would do the trick, but no, Media suppressed her fear and silently stared at me. Even threatened, she didn't yield. She hid her true intentions and didn't speak much, which reminded me of Lumié and made me feel closer to her.

Oh well, guess there's no point in trying to break your spirit. I'm gonna treat you like an equal, so be grateful.

"Don't worry, I'm not like that foolish Baron Dulac. I'll reward you for your work." Free work didn't last long, after all. If anyone thought someone else would work for them free of charge forever, they were either an idiot or thought of the other person as a slave. In short, you shouldn't do that to someone you were trying to make a deal with. "I'll give money to both your family and your lover's so that they aren't in need."

"How much?"

"Thirty gold coins each, every year for ten years."

Giving everything at once had the risk of them fleeing with the money, whereas paying little by little would ensure that our relationship would last.

"You would pay us that much...?"

"That's how important your job is."

Media fell silent once again. She was likely weighing the risks of spying on a lord and the reward I'd promised her. She needed one more push.

"More and more commoners are leaving the Dulac barony. Until

the new lord comes, anyone can move to another domain as long as they have the money for it. You understand what this means, right?”

Right now, while the situation was chaotic due to their lord’s death, the people of the Dulac territory could cross the frontier just by paying the soldiers guarding it. If Media’s relatives came to my demesne, then even if Seravimia discovered she was a spy, she would be the only one to die. There was no way someone as loving as she wouldn’t be attracted to my offer.

“If you can guarantee my family’s safety, then I have nothing more to say.” As I had expected, she was clever enough to understand my implication. She hadn’t been the head maid just for show.

“However, our deal is only valid for as long as you’re carrying out your mission. If you betray me, then... Well, you get it, right?” I didn’t forget to threaten her family.

Media stayed silent for a few seconds, then she finally said, “My job is to monitor the new lord. Nothing else?”

“That’s it. As for how you’ll do it, I’ll have one of my subordinates explain everything. He’ll be the one to whom you’ll give your reports.”

Media and her family should have died, but I was offering them a chance to live a good life instead. Nobody would refuse such a good deal.

“Understood. Then I accept your proposition.”

Just as expected, I got the answer I wanted.

“Good. I’m gonna tell the guards. Someone will come to free you shortly.”

I stepped out of the cell, had Gwynt lock it, and we left. Once we were far enough from Media, I talked to Gwynt. “The Dulac territory’s new lord is Seravimia, the hero. We’re currently in a cordial relationship, but who knows what will happen in the future. You understand that I need to stay alert and keep an eye on her as her neighbor, right?”

“You want to monitor the hero...?” Gwynt was bewildered by the idea. Of course he would be—we were talking about one of the leading figures of the kingdom. Most people would want to flee after

hearing what I had said.

"Are you scared?"

"No. I just never would have thought about doing such a thing. But you are right—we need to be vigilant."

I didn't tell him about the fact that Seravimia was gunning for me, so Gwynt only thought it was natural to be cautious of a neighboring domain and quickly regained his composure. With that, he shouldn't betray me easily and should continue to obediently serve me.

I received Media's first report a few weeks after our deal, so I went to my office to read it. She had successfully become the head maid and was currently working in the mansion to prepare to welcome their new lord. Media and her coworkers had recently learned that said new lord was Seravimia, which had shocked everyone. It was officially announced that the Dulac territory would be renamed the Seravimia territory.

I was satisfied to know that everything was going smoothly on Media's end and looked up from the report. Lumié was cleaning my office. We were alone, which was the perfect opportunity to bring up a certain subject.

"I want to talk about Ludwig."

Lumié stopped cleaning and looked at me nervously. "Did he do something?"

"No, he's working hard and has gotten stronger. However, he did get an injury during the war that needs a month to heal." Incidentally, Julianne had also been injured enough that I hadn't been able to meet her even once. When she got better, I'd praise her for defending my mansion. "He might die next time."

If Ludwig—her little brother and last remaining family member—died, Lumié might hold a grudge and betray me. She knew a lot of important information about my barony, so it would be bad news if she moved to another domain. If she showed signs of betrayal, I'd have to deal with her quickly.

...But if possible, I'd rather not have to.

"He said he was willing to die for the Girard territory. I am

prepared for such an eventuality," Lumié said.

"So you wouldn't regret it if he died in battle?"

"Of course I would. I want him to live. But if he were to die, then I would accept it was his fate." Lumié smiled. Then she slowly walked over to me and gently took my hands. It was pretty rare for her to touch me like this. My heart started racing as she leaned her face close to mine and our eyes met. "But more importantly, I am worried about you, Master Jack."

"About me?"

"Yes. Even though you are the lord, you fought on the front line."

I felt in her words that she was concerned about me from the bottom of her heart. Until recently, she had only ever cared about Ludwig and shown me only superficial concern. That was another sign that Lumié was starting to think and act differently from the game.

"You're fine with your brother dying, but not me?" I was aware that my question was unbecoming, but it was necessary to understand her thoughts. I looked her straight in the eyes to be sure she wouldn't deceive me.

"If I were asked to only choose one of you, then I would not hesitate to choose you, Master Jack."

"Even if that means the death of your last family member?"

"If it were the result of Ludwig's decision, then I would accept it."

Basically, she was saying that her brother wasn't the only person important to her—I was too. As I was surprised by how high her loyalty was, Lumié suddenly hugged me. Her soft mounds pressed against my face, and I felt my heart being healed. *Talk about being simpleminded.*

"As you are right now, I am ready to offer you my everything, Master Jack. I will always serve you—no matter what you do." Lumié leaned her face closer and whispered in my ear, "Even if your parents die."

Lumié had witnessed my attempt to kill my parents, and now she was saying it would be fine for me to do it for real.

"Are you sure?"

"Of course. After all, this is necessary for Ludwig to have a bright

future.”

I wasn’t certain she was being sincere, but now that the issue with Baron Dulac had been settled, I supposed I could just enact my plan and see for myself. I would need to deal with her if she were lying, but for some reason, I believed that wouldn’t happen.

“I see.” I pulled myself away from her chest with some effort. Then I was the one to whisper in her ear. “You won’t be able to get away from me anymore.”

“If that is what you desire, Master Jack, then I do not mind,” Lumié replied. She pulled away from me, picked up her bucket, then left my office.

And off she goes...

Later that night, I snuck into my parents’ room. They were sleeping in their bed as usual. The only decoration in the room was a long vase with flowers inside. There wasn’t a single sound—only silence. The room must not have been ventilated today, as the air felt a little stagnant.

My parents’ cheeks were sunken, and they looked pretty weak. They would die before long even without my help. But as my father’s body could work as a key for the ancient ruins, I would rather kill him quickly. My biggest fear had been Lumié’s reaction, but now that I knew she would never betray me as long as her brother was fine, I’d decided to do it tonight.

I took out two handkerchiefs from my pocket and piled them up.

“You’re the one who betrayed and tried to kill your son first. You must have been ready for me to retaliate, no?”

I had punished all the traitors, and I wouldn’t hesitate to do the same to them just because they were my parents. I felt perfectly calm.

“Die without making a fuss.”

I wetted the handkerchiefs with the water from the vase and covered my father’s mouth and nose. When I started to push with my hands, he tried to shake my arms off. The poison was still working, and he hadn’t woken up—his body was just moving on reflex. Unfortunately for him, I was strengthening myself with mana,

so his resistance was meaningless.

I kept pressing the handkerchiefs against his face, and my father gradually lost strength. As I watched him suffer, he eventually let go of my arms. His breathing had stopped—he was dead.

Next was my mother. I pressed the handkerchiefs against her nose and mouth. She resisted like my father, grabbing my arms, but it, too, proved futile. I watched her indifferently as she struggled, until eventually she stopped breathing and passed away.

With that, I had now committed the grave crime of double parricide, and yet I felt nothing. I confirmed once again that they were well and truly dead, put away the handkerchiefs, then opened the room's window.

The starry night sky was beautiful. Because of the three moonlike satellites, it was bright enough to create shadows—like, for example, the one from Adele, who was leaning against the wall.

"Were you keeping an eye on me as my guard?" I asked.

"Yes..." Adele replied, not looking away from the night sky. I guessed she found the situation too awkward to meet my eyes.

"You won't ask why I did it?"

"I have already decided that I will always be with you, no matter what you do, Master Jack. I do not need to know your reasons," she answered with something close to blind faith, then she finally turned my way. Her lips curled slightly upward as she shot me a peaceful smile. It felt fragile and transient, likely because she was forcing herself so that I wouldn't hate her.

I felt intense guilt for using her feelings for me like that, but I had no other choice but to do it if I wanted to survive—I had to discard that weak part of me.

"Keep monitoring Lumié, Gwynt, Kevin, Julianne, and all the people working in the mansion. If anyone is acting strange, report to me immediately."

"What will you do if they ever show signs of betrayal?"

"Then they'll have to die." Traitors would spell my doom—such was the ironclad rule of *Survival Strategies of a Corrupt Aristocrat*. It was a cruel world where, no matter how close to me they were, I would need to kill them.

"Then I shall do it," Adele declared.

I never expected her to suggest being in charge of killing our comrades, which made me feel that something was wrong with her.

As I wondered what to say, Adele continued, looking at me anxiously. "Will that let me become the perfect doll that will act as you wish?"

Did she hear my conversation with Seravimia? That was possible. She was a beastfolk, after all. At least, I wouldn't be surprised if she'd heard parts of it. And now, the wrongness and ephemerality I had felt from her made sense. I must have perceived her trying to become an unfeeling tool for me.

"You're misunderstanding something, Adele. I don't want a doll that does everything I ask it to. You are fine the way you are."

I didn't think of the people of this world as game characters. I wished for them to grow as they experienced joy, sorrow, anger, and many other emotions. I didn't want unthinking retainers that only did as I ordered them. To enjoy my life of luxury, I needed comrades I could trust.

"Even if that means I will show you my weak self again?" Adele inquired.

"I decided to keep you close, that side of you included."

"So I can just stay the same as always?"

"Naturally," I replied instantly, which caused her to silently cry. As I had thought, she had been forcing herself to be unfeeling. Of course she would—after all, Adele wasn't the kind of person who could readily kill her allies just because it was her job. If I wanted to protect her heart, then I would need to deal with traitors myself.

"Thank you very much. I shall always stay by your side, so please never abandon me."

"Don't worry. I'd never let you go even if you wanted to leave."



The dam finally broke, and Adele started to cry for real.

Tell me, Seravimia, how can you call her soulless? No matter how you look at her, she's a real person. I hope you'll realize that truth soon.

After a while, Adele stopped crying and went back to her room. I shot a last glance at my parents' corpses, closed the window, then returned to my bedroom.

I was a little excited and had trouble falling asleep at first, but as I lay on my bed with my eyes closed, sleep quickly took over me. A lot had happened over the past few days, but, at last, I was able to rest peacefully.

The next day, Lumié discovered my parents' corpses. That provoked a stir, but because I had already become the new head of the family, it didn't grow into an incident. There would be an investigation, and their deaths would be determined to be due to emaciation.

With that, I was now well and truly the head of House Girard. There was still my bet with Seravimia, Adele's anxiety, Kevin always trying to test me, and many other little issues, but for now, I wasn't at risk of dying anytime soon.

When I'd first arrived in this world, I'd almost died several times, but that shouldn't happen anymore. As long as I acted carefully, I should be able to live a life of luxury as a noble. I just hoped the day it would become a reality would arrive soon.

Afterword

Hello everyone, this is Wanta. Thank you so much for buying this book.

With this, *Survival Strategies of a Corrupt Aristocrat* has reached its third volume. It's all thanks to everyone's support that it was able to get this far, so once again, allow me to express my heartfelt gratitude.

Now, about this book. This volume brings an end to the first part of "Jack Girard's story," the story of a man who dies in despair only to become Jack Girard and be involved in deadly battles. With the rest period he has earned, he will now be able to focus on developing his domain and solving the issues within it.

However, his relationship with Seravimia, the hero, hasn't changed much. She's the kind of woman who could easily throw a fit and yell, "Let's die together!" Surely, she will continue to like him and stalk him until his death, chasing him to the end of the world. In a way, though in a different form from the game *Survival Strategies of a Corrupt Aristocrat*, Seravimia is also a walking death flag.

Let's all hope he'll be able to survive together with Julianne, his fiancée.

If you are interested, you can also read the web version of the story on the Kakuyomu website, so feel free to check it out to enjoy even more of the world of *Survival Strategies of a Corrupt Aristocrat*.

Finally, to everyone who has enjoyed reading this book and all the people involved in its publication, once again, thank you so much.

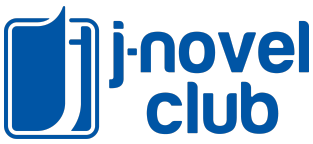
The manga adaptation is still in the works, so please look forward to it!











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Survival Strategies of a Corrupt Aristocrat: Volume 3
by Wanta

Translated by Boris LeCourt Edited by Danny Miles

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