



Author: **Fire**🔥**head**  
Illustrator: **KeG**

# Mercedes and the Waning Moon

The Dungeoneering  
Feats of a Discarded Vampire Aristocrat



The background of the cover is a detailed illustration. On the right, a young woman with short, layered purple hair and large, round glasses with orange-tinted lenses looks towards the viewer with a slight smile. She is wearing a dark purple or maroon garment with a high collar and a gold-colored brooch. Her right hand is raised, showing a large, faceted red gemstone ring on her index finger. On the left, a dark, rocky structure with a purple, spiky, flame-like top and a red eye is visible. Below it, a grey, bat-like creature with a blue eye is partially shown. The background is a deep blue night sky with a large, bright full moon and some distant stars.

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# Chapter 1: The Moon That Night Waned

I once heard that on the last night before the full moon, they call the moon “the moon of waiting nights” because people spend it eagerly waiting for the full moon to come. While it shines brightly in the sky, you can’t help but rue the fact that it is still today once your thoughts turn to how much more beautiful it will be tomorrow.

It was past midnight, the streets were empty, and the vehicles that occasionally passed me by made no stops. They must have thought I was a drunkard, or perhaps they didn’t even notice me at all. Scattered on the ground before me was the novel I was planning to read once I’d arrived home. The sales were abysmal and the reviews were scathing, describing it as a bland story with an uninspiring main character.

However, I felt a strong sense of kinship with the protagonist of this hated novel. True, they didn’t have any goals, and the story left much to be desired; there’s hardly any direction for the story to go in when the protagonist has no direction themselves. However, I couldn’t help but think: did the people behind those negative reviews have any purpose in their lives? And what about the people in the car that just passed me by? Did they have a clear idea of what they wanted to do or who they wanted to become?

I heard a train whiz by in the distance, and once again, I couldn’t help but think... Did the office workers riding home wish to be office workers? Was that really their dream? I doubted that. At least, it could never be mine. The hero of a fantasy tale has the goal of defeating the Demon King and saving the world. In a boxing manga, the main character has the goal of becoming the best there is. But in the *real* world, how many people truly lived with a clear goal they were striving toward?

As kids, we’re all asked what we want to be when we grow up at least once, and we always answer with stars in our eyes: “I want to be a baseball player,” “I want to be president,” “I want to be a scientist,” “I want to be an idol.” They’re



answers of childish naivety, and only those who don't know how harsh reality is—how difficult and painful that path is—can spout them. Yet, within those words are dreams. When young, we must all live with purpose. As the protagonists of our own stories, the world must sparkle.

However, as we grow up, we're forced to confront reality. We experience setbacks, learn the limits of hard work, and eventually, we lose sight of our dreams and begin to live solely to make it through another day. In that case, we must all be the main characters in directionless stories. Just like that moon up in the sky, we will never be full. Are we not all moons lacking purpose, damned to a fate of eternal wane?

At that very moment, my own bland story was coming to an end, with a conclusion that was wholly undramatic. Had I gotten into an accident saving a child I might have gone out with style, but instead...someone in a rush simply bumped into me while climbing the pedestrian bridge, flinging me over the edge and causing me to hit my head. That person ran, and now, they were out of my sight.

My blood wet the ground, and my limbs were frozen as if I were paralyzed. My consciousness began to fade. As I felt all of this, one final thought passed through my mind: *I lived such a pathetic life...* After that, my eyes closed. I'd stared up at the nearly full moon until the very end. And now, I would never see a full moon again.



*At what point did I realize I lived with knowledge of this life both mine and not?*

*At what point did I realize this was my second chance?*

One day—ever since she could remember—the life of someone not her had begun to reside in her memories. The current girl's name was Mercedes of House Grunewald, born to one of the many concubines of Sir Bernhard, one of the vampires who ruled this vast land.

At what point had she become aware of these memories of her past life? She felt like they had always been with her, ever since her current self sprouted into existence. However, to Mercedes, they felt more like another person's



knowledge rather than memories of a past life. She knew exactly what kind of person they had been along with their tastes and hobbies. She even knew what had caused their death. But still, this person felt like a total stranger—when given a summary of the story of someone you had never met and told it was your past life, no one would simply believe it without question.

Not to mention, that person's story was terribly...*terribly* boring. To Mercedes, the character who had left her with this knowledge was not her past self, but someone who *supposedly* was her past self.

Still, if asked whether the knowledge they had left her was useful or not, the answer was undoubtedly yes. It had allowed her to gain a sense of self at a young age, and even cognitive abilities that could put the average adult to shame. But more than anything, it allowed her to know just how precarious her circumstances were. She pondered this as she walked down the halls of the manor...if it was even big enough to deserve such a title.

Mercedes Grunewald was a vampire who had lived through five cycles of the planet around the Sun. In other words, she was only five years old. And although she was a vampire, she was not the kind of living dead creature her past self had known of. In *this* world, vampires were powerful beings who could use magic. They lived long lives and had extraordinary healing powers—albeit they were weak to sunlight.

While they did drink the blood of other living things, it was not in excess, and as horrifying as a bloodsucking creature may sound, there are other organisms that do the same. Take, for example, mosquitoes, although that may not be the most flattering comparison. Accordingly, vampires were able to bear children and cross running water. However, those mosquito repellent candles had no effect on them.

Hearing all this, you're probably thinking that she won the lottery of life. Sure, when it came to her race, she *had* won. But what about her appearance? She looked in the mirror suspended from the wall and studied her features. Her hair appeared both blue and silver depending on the angle of the light, and it was tied behind her, extending to her lower back. While her countenance was still far too cherubic, it was undoubtedly beautiful, so much so that attempts at modesty would only sound sarcastic.



Behind her glasses, her golden eyes were upturned in a determined expression. Her pupils dilated in a catlike way depending on both the lighting and her mood, but right now, they looked mostly human. And the cat similarities didn't end there—they also glowed in the dark, most likely due to the same trait that had evolved in cats to allow them to see in lowlight conditions: a reflective plate located behind the retina.

Her nose was small and refined, and her lips below were the color of cherry blossoms. Her skin was milky white. In this life, she had also been blessed with looks. At least, they left her with no yearning for greater beauty. While it may sound boastful, she was certain that she would grow up to be a beautiful woman. There were no issues with her physical fitness either; as a vampire, it was beyond a human's.

In all these aspects, Mercedes had no complaints. She could be proud of the body she'd been given. However, she couldn't help but feel a sense of dread about her birth...or rather, her environment and life circumstances. As has been repeatedly mentioned, she was a vampire in this world, and given that "*this world*" is written and not "*this life*," you have assuredly deduced that the place she was in now was not Earth. Instead, she resided somewhere called the Red Planet. True to the cliché in almost every one of those light novels published at the same lightning speed as those mass-produced mechs that only exist to be curb-stomped within seconds, she had been isekai'd.

Additionally, as was said in the beginning, Mercedes was the child of two vampires, and her mother was a concubine—albeit one with quite a low position in the harem. The manor she had been afforded was a tiny one befitting a provincial noble without wealth. That much was obvious at a glance. You may think just being given a house is enough, but not having permission to live in the main estate means exactly what you would think it does. And to make matters worse, they were treated like this despite the fact that her father ruled vast lands and had an abundance of wealth and property.

A strong gust of wind would cause the windows to rattle, and the floor would creak with every step, evidence perhaps of rot. Not to mention that mice or cockroaches could be spotted daily—a truly dreadful experience. Additionally, while we are on the topic of grievances, it is worth mentioning that in all five



years of her life, Mercedes had never once seen her father. In fact, to her knowledge, he had never even visited her mother in that time either. No matter how long you live as a vampire, ignoring her for five years seemed a bit cruel, even if she *was* just a concubine.

Given all of this, it was glaringly obvious that her mother had been shunned...or maybe he didn't even care about her at all. Yet Mercedes could see that, at least for now, they were still able to make ends meet. While they received the bare minimum of provisions from her father, both mother and child were able to scrape by under the watch of their single old maid.

However, that wouldn't last forever. This meager life had been afforded to them by the fact that Mercedes barely qualified as an heir to his noble title (emphasis on *barely*). The Grunewald name would surely be passed down to a child of his legal wife, which was fine. The problem was what came next. Once a proper heir had been selected, Mercedes and all the other children of the concubines would become useless. Given how cruelly they were already treated, it would be overly naive to believe that they'd continue to be taken care of after that point.

*My mother and I will be abandoned. I shouldn't be surprised,* she thought. But then, she began to consider what she should do once that time came. Why should she simply wait and bide her time when it could come as early as tomorrow?

She couldn't afford to do that. Who would just wait if they knew misfortune was on their doorstep? At the same time, though, what *could* she do? She had no fortune or fame. The only boon she had was her vampiric body.

"Ah, Lady Mercedes! Are you to head out today as well?"

"Yes, I'm going to head out to play for a bit, Nan. You don't need to let mother know, though."

"Please do enjoy yourself."

Mercedes had run into the old maid in the hallway, and after exchanging brief pleasantries, she walked past the study. Inside were tightly packed bookcases along with a small desk and chair. The desk was piled with books she had read countless times, to the point that every single line and letter had settled



permanently into her memory. Having knowledge of her past life, she'd first picked up reading to make sense of her current circumstances, searching for a way to live even once disowned by her father, preparing for that inevitable day which could come at any moment. To this end, she desperately sought a way to save herself, her mother, and their maid.

Mercedes was thankful that Lady Luck seemed to be on her side...or perhaps that was Lady *Unluck*. In any case, she had found a path forward—a job that anyone in this world could do regardless of age or standing. The only cost was your life. With that one chip thrown on the table, you could purchase danger and make a living as a daring adventurer. They called these people “Seekers,” and they earned their keep through exploring the many dungeons and untrodden regions that littered this world. It was the deadliest job there was alongside being a soldier, but for five-year-old Mercedes, it was her only shot at being able to provide.

Still, even if she was a vampire, entering that line of work with only her inborn talents would quickly take the “living” out of “living dead.” There were many vampires who worked as Seekers, and many of them never returned home. Thus, she pondered this predicament, and it didn't take long for her to arrive at an answer that was plain and simple yet childish beyond belief.

*I need to become strong. Anyone could've come to that conclusion, and I know that if it were really that simple, everyone and their mother would be doing it, but still.*

Despite her underdeveloped body, it was the only one she had, and thus, the only one she could use. That was why she would go practice archery whenever she had the time.

She stepped outside and noticed the azure moon glowing in the sky above—yes, the moon in this world was blue, though no one knew the reason. The moon also had another name—Eden.

Mercedes looked upon the faint glow of the full moon and reached her hand out to the sky.





Of course, that hand could never reach Eden, but still, from her vantage point, the moon rested in her tiny palm, trapping its light. Having been given this life, she had no intentions to let it waste away. While her small hands were now empty, she would one day be able to grasp something. Whether that would be fortune or fame she did not know, but one day, she would hold something that affirmed her existence—something that would allow her to proudly declare with no regrets that she was glad to have been born. This time, her moon would one day become full.

“I...want to live a life of no regrets. I want to die with a smile.”

She would run through this second life full speed ahead. She would make no stops, and one day, she would reach the end feeling happy. Now in her second life, she had found a goal.

“I’m going to live this life to the fullest!”

That was a promise made to the moon, heard by no one, but for some reason, the full moon seemed to glow even brighter once those words had left her lips.

## Chapter 2: Laying the Groundwork

Mercedes had no one to teach her how to fight. Both her mother and maid were vampires, but they weren't fighters, so, knowing she could never ask either of them for help, she began her training in secret in the nearby mountains.

Even in her past life, Mercedes had never taken part in anything that could truly be considered a fight—basically, her combat experience was nonexistent. As she had vowed to become strong in this world, that was quite the insurmountable wall. She was no longer in the serene, peaceful land of Japan on Earth. While she had yet to visit town, the many books she had read led her to the conclusion that it was a dog-eat-dog kind of world out there. While power was what she sought, she knew not how to wield it. One wrong step could be the difference between life and death.

However, for better or for worse, Mercedes possessed the knowledge from her previous life. Many great stories slept dormant inside her...yet those were nothing but fiction, non-realities born from imagination and delusion. Still, this world was also quite like those, and thus, Mercedes tried all the various training methods contained within them.

Yes, she knew this was silly. In all honesty, it was stupid, and she herself thought she was a fool. It would be hard to deny that she was among the pathetic lot who had confused reality with manga. Still, she had nothing else to rely on, and she wasn't about to stop in her tracks just because that one thing was nonsensical. She was resolute on moving forward. The verdict on whether this was truly stupid or not could come after she tried.

—Year One—

At first, she attached weights to herself. She would wake up early at night, and train until the morning. Vampires were a nocturnal species, and thus, her active hours were the reverse of what they had been when she was human. In her previous life, she would usually wake up around 7 a.m. and go to bed



around midnight, but now, she would wake up at 7 p.m. and go to sleep at noon.

In her past life, three in the afternoon was unofficial snack time, but for vampires, that was three in the morning. Unfortunately, the snacks here left much to be desired. Due to their poverty, the most she could expect was fruit.

In any case, now that she had shifted from diurnal to nocturnal, she trained deep into the night. It may sound like something straight out of a horror movie, though she did eventually get used to it.

Once Mercedes no longer found it odd being active during the night, she began to affix rocks to her hands and feet. Once she got used to their weight, she would increase the size, and before she knew it, she was able to dash through the mountains while carrying a boulder.

She read a book on martial arts and practiced hundreds of thousands of amateur kicks and punches every day, kicking trees and jabbing at the leaves that fell from their branches. She came up with a training regimen that involved surrounding herself in trees and knocking every leaf that fell from their branches to the ground before they would naturally get there.

Once she could perform a thousand push-ups without difficulty, she began to do them while performing handstands. Once that became easy, she removed a hand, and eventually, she was able to do the whole set while supporting herself on a single finger.

Her training was strenuous, and sometimes, it would leave her injured. Luckily, though, she was a vampire. Almost always, it would heal in just one day. Her body was able to withstand unimaginable strain.

When not doing physical training, she spent her time at home reading every book she could get her hands on, searching for any information that could prove useful to her, be it language, history, common sense, social studies, culture...or even magic. She read every book in the manor and absorbed its contents. Since she had both the malleable brain of a child and the comprehensive ability of an adult, study came easy to Mercedes.

For now, it was time to lay the groundwork. She would put everything she could beneath her feet no matter what; she had no way of knowing at the

moment what would be useful later, after all. The stronger the foundation, the higher blocks could be piled, and thus, it was imperative that she build that foundation.

“Magic comes from four basic elements... It is something anyone can control, but the strength of their abilities depends on their innate talent...” As Mercedes read in the study, she made sure to memorize each word and phrase.

It seemed that the fantastical power of magic existed in this world. Assuming this book wasn't something read for leisure and entertainment—akin to a light novel—at least. According to it, magic was divided into four basic elements: fire, water, earth, and wind. How stereotypical.

In addition, there were four elements deriving from the four basic ones: light, ice, metal, and lightning. Fire, at its extremes, became the light of suns. Water, when cooled, became ice. Earth, when hardened, became metal. Wind, at its fiercest, became lightning. These seemed to be the only eight elements in this world; there was no dark or non-type magic.

At most, any one person, regardless of aptitude, could learn four of these. Vampires and monsters had a primary and secondary elemental affinity, and together with the two elements that derived from their basic affinities, they could control four. According to the book, all living things were bound by this limit.

“To awaken to your powers, you must meditate in a place befitting your affinities and feel the energy that flows there. To determine your affinities... Huh, it says, ‘go to the assessment bureau.’ It seems like I’ll have to rely on my instincts to figure it out on my own.”

Mercedes decided to first try meditating on the same mountain she always went to to train. There was a spring nearby, and obviously, there was earth too. If earth or water were one of her affinities, she'd be able to figure something out. There was wind blowing constantly as well, so that could also prove useful. But what would she do if her affinity was fire? Was meditating near a campfire enough?

No, she could ponder that later. For now, she would just begin. Without that, nothing could come next.



—Year Two—

Now six years old, Mercedes meditated every day, but she had yet to feel like she was awakening to anything. She still continued with her daily workouts that even she found to be a bit too intense. One day, however, she noticed while training that a scratch wound from a branch on her arm had completely healed.

*Before, that would have taken a full day to heal...*

It wasn't rare for Mercedes to get injuries. In fact, it happened fairly often, and each time, her vampiric healing abilities would close the wound. However, the speed of her healing had clearly increased.

*So this is what vampiric healing abilities are capable of...*

In the memories from her past life, there were many stories of vampires, and plenty of them rejuvenated as if it were nothing after being stabbed through the heart or being decapitated. Hearing the word "vampire," Mercedes's strongest association was their immortality, but currently, she was far from immortal, and while she hadn't tested it, she was fairly certain that getting her head chopped off would result in death. Plenty of vampires who became Seekers perished in the dungeons, and thus, it was safe to assume that she wasn't indestructible.

However, she then made a deranged leap of logic. *If I use these healing powers more, my body might become more accustomed to injury and heal even faster.*

It was truly idiotic. Basically, she decided to intentionally hurt herself. It was the same principle of supercompensation, the famous idea that by straining your muscles, the continued damage and reconstruction of their fibers makes them stronger.

However, that didn't translate over to the absurd notion that the more injuries you suffered, the quicker you healed, and the effect relied on properly moderated exercise and breaks. Equating these two ideas was foolish.

This would give the average person pause, but not Mercedes. Regret could come later. For now, she needed to push forward. As soon as she reached that conclusion, she began to harm herself. Thankfully, vampires were resistant to

pain, and thus, she suffered little. Pain was the body's alarm bell, and so it wasn't odd for vampires to have quieter bells given their healing powers.

—Year Three—

Living in this world—or rather, having a vampiric body—was playing on easy mode to an absurd degree. Mercedes's logic—which was really nothing more than a wild theory—on self-harm had produced results. The more injuries she sustained and the more her body had to heal those injuries, the sturdier she became. The same injuries began to heal faster, and thus, she concluded that her body would be able to withstand deeper cuts. And it did; her body recognized those injuries and healed them faster. Now, she could heal almost any wound in a mere second.

Once, she accidentally cut herself all the way to the bone, but even that injury healed fully in just five seconds. Still, it really hurt, so she had no intention of trying it again.

Her year of meditation had also bore fruit. She could now feel the power of this planet she called home. One of her affinities turned out to be earth. In fantasy tales, it's always the top candidate for most boring element and therefore not very useful.

Now that she had determined her affinity, she next needed to learn magic. The books in her study told her that an earth affinity was nothing to celebrate. Creating stalagmites, flinging rocks, and making dips in the earth was about the extent of its capabilities. It lacked ostentation.

The books even said that it was the weakest in terms of offensive power. But on the other hand, it was lauded as an element well suited for support, as one could construct walls of rock to protect their comrades with it or throw their enemies off-balance by removing the earth from where they stood.

As Mercedes read over this particular book in the study, she began to ponder whether there was any effective magic that utilized the power of the earth. For example, what about gravity? That was the power of the planet they stood on. She found it odd that there was no magic that used the element of earth to manipulate gravity.

However, if it didn't exist, all she had to do was make it. All the magic in this



world had once been created by someone, which was why she didn't view this as an impossible task. For example, there was a spell in the book known as "Stone Edge," an attack that launched rocks at your enemies. However, this utilization of earth magic and a name for it hadn't been around forever. There must have been someone who invented the spell and promulgated it, which meant Mercedes could create magic too.

With that in mind, she began her trials to craft a kind of magic that could control gravity that very day.

—Year Four—

Mercedes's strength grew to shocking heights. A blow from her fist could turn boulders to dust, and she could dash through trees like the wind. Light injuries would heal as soon as she sustained them, and she could easily jump over treetops. But an even greater boon to her was the fact that she had finally perfected her gravity magic. If you put your mind to it, you can do anything.

Each day she would feel the planet's power as she meditated. She imagined its gravity acting excessively on her. At the beginning, this was fruitless, but she began to feel a slight hint of this gravity after the third month, and by the sixth, she could feel it clearly.

She continued this training, and once a year had passed, she was able to create a gravitational field so strong it could even immobilize her, the caster. Even though she could only create fields that were exceedingly small in area, she still felt ready to consider the spell completed—and now, it needed a name.

"All right. Let's call this 'Druck.'"

"Druck" simply meant "gravity." There was something quite simplistic about this name, but considering this was her first spell, such laziness could be excused.

On the same day she mastered Druck, she began to practice casting it on herself. Considering a certain national hero of Japan had grown strong by training under increased gravity, it was bound to prove effective.

Thus five years had gone by. When Mercedes Grunewald was ten, the curtain opened on her story.

## Chapter 3: At Least Let My Child Be Free

Lydia Grunewald was the daughter of a commoner who lived peacefully in Blut, the finest city on the continent of Tyrrhena. On her world, the Red Planet, the red ground bathed in the light of the sun and received protection from the blue planet of Eden. According to mythology, the gods arrived here on a ship from Eden and performed a miracle that turned this arid and dead land into a world that could support life. Then, the gods released the life-forms they brought with them and grew their numbers over many long years, resulting in the Red Planet Lydia called home.

Beings made in the gods' image known as "Falsch" built civilizations. With the form of gods as their base, they differed in small details. Those with the characteristics of beasts were known as chimäre, and those with the characteristics of birds were known as vogel. There were also the elfen who were skilled in magic, and finally, the vampires who most resembled the gods but differed the most in their ecology. These four races were known as the Four Great Falsch and divided the world into four parts among them.

Among vampires, Lydia was a woman of stereotypical mediocrity. While beautiful, she lacked skill. Her arms were weak, just barely strong enough to crush an apple, and in her whole life, she had never lifted more than a hundred kilograms. During a hundred-meter dash, she couldn't break eight seconds even at top speed. Despite lacking talent, however, her beauty was what truly doomed her.

One day, she caught Lord Bernhard's eye in town and was ordered to attend to him through the night. Not being the slightest bit attracted to him, she had wanted to refuse, but he was a feudal lord, and she knew what the consequences of rejecting him would be.

They only shared a bed one time, but it resulted in pregnancy. She had inwardly cursed that "fucking bastard" for not using protection more times than she could count.



Thus, she became a concubine, albeit a mistreated one. The manor afforded to her was a house in name only, and there, she was isolated with only one maid to attend to her. She had asked that her house at least be two stories with a bath and a pool, but that request had been ignored. *God damn it!* she lamented to herself.

She made it clear that for her meals, she would only accept the highest quality steak cooked to a perfect medium rare every single day, but there were plenty of days where she wasn't served this. And for some reason, the steaks she did receive were always cooked well-done.

Unable to bear it any longer, she told Bernhard that he didn't need to come visit her anymore. He listened, being the good-for-nothing man he was.

This tough, brave woman had a single daughter. Her name was Mercedes, and even discounting parental bias, she was an adorable girl who looked just like her mother. Lydia was incredibly thankful that her genes had done the heavy lifting. She would have cried had her daughter been born with the menacing features of her father.

Until the age of five, her daughter was a fairly average, cute child. But after that point, she began to demonstrate an alacrity that surpassed that of a child. She must have been aware of the situation she was in.

One day, she began to read through the books in the study, and Lydia knew that when the child claimed to be playing in the garden, she was actually in the mountains. She never even pretended to be playing. Within five seconds of exiting the house, she'd pick up a boulder and run right past the windows. It didn't take a genius to realize what she was up to. Honestly, she could have at least *tried* to hide it.

Each day, that boulder grew bigger, and by the time she was nine, she was able to move while carrying a boulder ten meters tall. *Really, at least* try.

Lydia concluded that her daughter must have had some sort of goal—one she was training toward in order to escape the life she was born into. Lydia would slip inside the study after she had left, and each time, there was a book about Seekers opened on the desk. There was no doubt in Lydia's mind, and thus, she wasn't shocked when at the age of ten, her daughter announced to her,

“Mother, I’m going to become a Seeker.”

“I know.”

Mercedes seethed with enough magical power it could knock the socks off the average adult, and she had made her declaration with an expression of determination that you only see once in a lifetime. Lydia’s only real impression was, *Oh, so today’s the day she finally tells me.*

A ten-year-old becoming a Seeker was of course dangerous. The average parent would’ve stopped her, but Lydia knew well that Mercedes had a high combat capability. She may have been seeing things through the rose-colored glasses of a parent, but even then, she believed wholeheartedly that her child was a prodigy.

While it paled in comparison to a wild beast’s, vampires had a strong sense of smell—or at least, something akin to that—and right now, Lydia’s was telling her, *Damn, this girl is something.* At only ten years old, her child had an aura of strength.

In reality, Lydia had felt this long ago, though there wasn’t much point in saying it now. *But seriously, she needs to at least try to conceal it.*

“Um...you’re not going to stop me?”

“If you were a normal child, I would, but you’ve grown incredibly strong, no? So, well...as long as you don’t push yourself too hard, I have no problem with it,” answered Lydia cheerfully as she sipped her coffee.

Mercedes seemed to find the whole ordeal quite anticlimactic. Her mother either had a shockingly laissez-faire attitude or just had unshakable faith in her.

Lydia placed a hand on her daughter’s head and flashed her a kind smile. “Thanks to that fucking bastard—ahem, my ill fortune, I am no longer able to live my life freely. But you are, and I want you to live your life as you wish. That is my greatest desire.”

Lydia didn’t know what her daughter had in mind, but she didn’t want to chain her down. She was okay with being the only one trapped in this rotten cage—as long as her daughter could freely spread her wings and fly into the grand sky above.

That was what she wished for above all else.

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Mercedes had been certain that her mother would oppose this decision on the grounds of her age, but she had said yes—so readily that it completely caught Mercedes off guard. Still, she had been granted permission, so she resolved to view it as a simple fortunate miscalculation.

At once, she began the necessary preparations to begin work as a Seeker. Seekers explored remote regions and dungeons in order to understand them. It was only natural that such work would require staying in the same place for days or weeks, or even months and years in some cases. As a novice, she didn't have any intention of taking on such work, nor did she think they would allow her. Still, she thought it best to at least prepare.

The first thing she wanted was provisions that could last. Water was equally important. As she would be visiting a variety of places, she wanted clothing suited for expeditions. What she currently had wasn't lavish, but it was still the type of frilly dress commoners wouldn't wear. In terms of her old world, it resembled a Bunad, the traditional Norwegian folk costume. She wanted pants in place of a skirt, as well as something with a plainer design.

She also had to consider equipment. She was quite confident in her bare-handed combat abilities, but she didn't have any basis for comparison. It was quite plausible that despite her five years of training, she was actually quite weak.

She was definitely much stronger than she'd been as a human. That much was certain. Taking down a grizzly bear with her fists would be easy. But in this country of vampires, it was possible that *everyone* was that strong. Using humans as a baseline was pointless.

To summarize her conclusion: she needed money for provisions and supplies.

"First step is making some money." With a wry grin, Mercedes lamented the characteristic helplessness of someone just starting out in the world. She wanted to go adventuring as a Seeker, which she needed money for, but in order to gain that money, she needed to work. It was like having the key to a treasure chest locked inside it.



This meant that she had to begin with simple jobs that didn't require equipment. With no other options, she began with nothing but the clothes on her back and left her home with resolve in her heart.

"I'll be back."

"Work hard, okay?"

With her mother's encouragement, Mercedes stepped outside and immediately leaped into the air. This was another spell she had invented, which she called "befreien." By temporarily weakening the gravity around her, she was able to float in the air, and not only did it allow for gravity-defying flight, but the weakened force of it also quickened her movements. The one thing she needed to be cautious of, however, was completely neutralizing the gravitational field around her; it would have her flying straight out of the atmosphere.

Inside this weakened gravity field, she kicked down hard on the ground below her. The recoil shot her into the air, and she watched as the scenery flew by behind her. Soaring through the sky like birds was a dream humanity had long held. Planes and helicopters allowed for a pseudo-realization of this, but flying in the flesh was still but a fantasy. The joy of having changed that brought a smile to Mercedes's lips.

Once she began to lose speed, she kicked once again to accelerate. While she had almost completely eliminated the pull of gravity, she was not in a vacuum, and thus, there was still air resistance. Unlike in space, she would eventually decelerate and come to a stop, which meant she had to kick the sky like this over and over.

After a while, Mercedes finally arrived in town. Her manor was in the countryside, far removed from the city. The most likely reason was that her father didn't want her and her mother in the public light.

Of course, Lord Bernhard himself had a castle-sized manor in the city. It was where he lived, and Mercedes assumed his legal wife was there as well along with their children. Not that she cared much about her father considering she didn't even know what he looked like.

Mercedes was brimming with excitement and curiosity at being in the city for

the first time, but she made sure not to goggle like a country bumpkin. She remained outwardly calm and walked confidently down the city streets as she studied her surroundings. It was currently midnight—the time the streets were most bustling. Under the light of the moon, the people busily shuffled to and fro.

*Hm, I supposed as much during my time in the manor, but this world really is about as developed as the Middle Ages. Actually, it might be a bit more advanced than I'd guessed.*





The buildings throughout the city weren't overly large and gaudy, but a careful look revealed they were constructed with advanced techniques. The roads were paved with cobblestone to allow for easier passage, and the structures were placed with balance so as not to harm the cityscape.

Mercedes stepped onto a large road and found it lined with street vendors. Some even covered their stands with what appeared to be tarps. She couldn't help but feel that there was something off about this view, though. Rather than a street in the Middle Ages, it was more as if the Middle Ages had been recreated with twenty-first century technology. The buildings were too perfect. Of course, long years of use had led to their deterioration and some were soiled, but that wasn't the problem. Somehow, they just seemed too complete. It was as if she was visiting a Renaissance fair rather than the real Renaissance.

The sanitation seemed quite modern as well. At the very least, waste was nowhere to be found on the road, nor was there any litter. It was as if this were a version of the Middle Ages that took only the aesthetics characteristic of fantasy worlds. It simply felt *off*.

*I'm sure I only think that because I came from present-day Japan...*

Either way, she resolved not to think about it too much. She needed to simply acknowledge what was before her and accept it. She might find it odd, but the world was the way it was regardless. In fact, she was quite glad to see the city was in such good shape; she didn't want to have to walk through streets covered in excrement.

For now, she took a light stroll around the city. From what she could tell, it seemed like a fine town that was easy to live in. The buildings in the residential quarters were pristine and located near parks. The area she assumed to be the shopping district was lined with stores. She even found facilities that appeared to be public baths.

One thing that stood out to her in particular was that the high-class women were dressed in something quite similar to the traditional German dress known as a dirndl. *It's like Germany...no, Japan? It's as if the Japanese and Germans came together to build a civilization. What could cause culture to develop like this?*

Cultural development was driven by characteristics of the land alongside its climate and environment. Almost anything can be traced back to reveal a reason it became that way. But Mercedes couldn't help but feel that there was something warped about this place. Of course, it could just have been her imagination.

She walked down the street and made note of where the shops she thought she'd need were located.

*Well then, I suppose it's about time I headed for the Seekers' Guild.*

Feeling she had done enough sightseeing, she set off toward her destination.

## Chapter 4: The Town of Eternal Night

The Seekers' Guild was established in the year 112 R.P. to manage and support Seekers. The Red Planet had countless unexplored regions, and only thirty percent of dungeons were believed to have been mapped.

Dungeons were gigantic, closed spaces that would suddenly appear in the landscape. Shaped like caves, they would pop up in fields or swamps and remain there until someone ventured to their deepest depths. Even more of a nuisance was the fact that monsters—beings known to harm Falsch—would appear from the majority of dungeons. It was necessary to regularly eradicate them and have people journey to the dungeons' depths, and it was Seekers who carried out these tasks.

However, there was obvious danger in this job, and nobody wanted to risk their life without reward. Thus, the nation had established an association meant to support Seekers and create an environment conducive to their work. When Seekers gathered, those who got along could team up, and lending weapons for cheap lowered the death rate. The experiences of those who had conquered dungeons could be turned into manuals, and if others had half-explored dungeons, their maps could be shared with all.

The Seekers' Guild had a long history and multiple large facilities in the city—one of which Mercedes now stood before. It was twelve meters tall, thirty meters wide, and twenty-five meters deep. A sign that hung above the front was marked with the weighty logo of two swords crossed in front of a cave entrance. Two double glass doors led to the building's interior: a clean room with white walls, ceilings, and floors. Multiple people who appeared to be Seekers were sitting on stools inside, and plastered on the walls were requests, guild announcements, and snippets from the news.

Light fixtures powered by magic hung from the ceiling. They were too expensive for the average person to afford, but they lit the room fully at night. Vampires' eyes worked better at this time, and thus, they could see well with



little light. On the other hand, they were weak to strong light and their visions worsened during the day. So while the light fixtures did light the room, they glowed with the same intensity of the sun at dusk.

Mercedes wore her glasses for this very reason. She didn't have poor sight—hers was quite good—but she despised not being able to see well in the light, so she had donned glasses made from a material that could partially block light rays.

Glasses were a common item in this world, and they even had the more trendy monocles that catered to fancier tastes. Monocles were one thing, but vampires had little need for glasses since incredibly few suffered from poor eyesight. Those that blocked light did have some demand, but as of now, Mercedes had seen no other vampires adorned with spectacles. The ones she wore had been simply gathering dust in her house, and so she now used them with her mother's permission. Despite her home's derelict state, it was still the manor of a nobleman; it wasn't too strange to discover items inside not commonly found on the market.

Or perhaps, poor vision in daylight was simply such a natural fact of life for vampires that none were bothered by it. In Mercedes's old world, there had been glasses that made it easier to see at night, but outside of driving, there were very few people who made habitual use of them. If someone had difficulty seeing in the light, they could simply live a nocturnal lifestyle. Mercedes may have only been bothered due to her sensibilities from her past life—in other words, her sensibilities of once being a human.

Anyhow, let us get back on track. Upon entering this dimly lit building that catered to vampire light sensitivities, Mercedes ignored the looks of half interest, half derision and headed straight for the counter.

“My, aren't you a sweet, adorable thing! You've got any business with us, darling?” It would have been nice if this receptionist was a beautiful woman, but instead, it was a tall, pale, and lanky vampire. Of course, a *male* vampire. His head was shaven and there were stitch marks on his face. It was a current trend in the capital, many putting such marks on their arms or faces. Given their rapid healing abilities, vampires could have a distorted sense of fashion.

“I want to register as a Seeker.”

“Hmm... Sure thing. Could you fill out this form for me, darling?”

The document Mercedes was handed gave the signer the right to become a Seeker and receive the guild’s aid. It clarified that a contract with the guild did not deprive freedoms and that the guild and Seeker would not bind each other or issue demands. It also stipulated that the guild would not be responsible for any harm suffered by a Seeker during their adventures, and that even should a dungeon’s difficulty level be adjusted or monetary reward for a completed job change, the guild would not be liable for any grievances concerning compensation. Finally, it stated that the contract could be terminated at any time.

“Hmph.” After reading the form over, Mercedes looked at the blanks on it. If you agreed to these terms, you were supposed to sign your name and write your age. There was also a line for address, but as there were many who had no permanent residence, it was optional. Mercedes wrote her own name, but she hesitated to add “Grunewald.” It was the name of the feudal lord who ruled the lands this city was a part of. Even if she was just the daughter of a concubine, she was certain that including her family name would cause problems, so she decided to write her mother’s maiden name instead.

“Here.”

“Thanks, darling. Let’s see... Mercedes Calvert? Twenty years old, with no address. I thought there was no way you were as young as you looked, but you’re really a late bloomer, huh? I wish I still had those youthful looks.”

Obviously, perhaps, vampires developed differently than humans. They grew at the same rate until a certain age, at which vampires stopped developing, and further changes to their appearance came on incredibly slowly. However, that age differed for each individual. While some stopped growing as early as twelve, others would advance to their late teens. It was quite common to see a woman who appeared to be in her twenties next to what appeared to be a twelve-year-old girl, and you’d assume they were mother and daughter only to find out that the “girl” was really the woman’s grandmother.

Vampires referred to the age at which they stopped developing as their

“perpetual age,” and while the exact mechanisms remained obscure, it was generally believed that those who stopped developing earlier had a greater potential for strength.

“But you’ve gotta get better handwriting, dear! That two in ‘twenty’ looks like a one!”

“My apologies. Please fix it.” Despite Mercedes’s brazen demand, she inwardly apologized to the receptionist. He had actually gotten it backward; Mercedes had purposefully scribbled the numbers in chicken scratch so that they would be misread.

Oddly, the numbers used in this world were the same Arabic numerals of Mercedes’s old one. Thus, to correctly write the number “1,” you first would draw a short line upward to the right and then draw a vertical straight line. Finally, you would draw a horizontal line that positioned that vertical one in its center. She had purposefully made the first stroke of hers extra long and situated her final line too far to the right. The result was a terribly written “1” that looked more like a “2.”

She wasn’t falsifying information. She had written her actual age of ten. Maybe her one was a bit sloppy and looked too much like a two, but there was nothing she could do about that.

*But it really is quite strange...*

It was convenient that the number system of this world was base ten and used Arabic numerals, but at the same time, it was objectively puzzling. Arabic numerals originated in India before spreading to Europe and becoming the standard of the world all over. But there was no India or Arabia in this world. So, how exactly had Arabic numerals come about?

If the countries that should have promulgated that system didn’t exist, it was incredibly strange that their invention alone would. It would be like Japanese food existing even though there was never a Japan.

However, no matter how much Mercedes pondered this question, no one could tell her the answer. In the end, she concluded that since she had no means to solve the mystery, it was pointless to think about.

“Next, I’ll be checking your Seeker aptitude. Can you put some blood on this card for me, darling?”

“Sure.” With no hesitation, Mercedes used a nail to cut her finger and dripped some of the blood onto the black card the receptionist handed her. The wound closed in an instant, clearly impressing the receptionist.

“My, aren’t you amazing! You might be a newbie with promise, darling... What the hell?” The receptionist watched the card with excitement, but in a moment, it turned to shock, his tone becoming rougher as the character he put on crumbled.

His reaction elicited some anxiety in Mercedes. Were her stats really so terrible?

“Your arm strength, leg strength, endurance, and stamina are all above level four? And your regeneration skill is level six? Your only normal stat is your magic at level two... Huh. Maybe I can just assign you Rank B or C right off the bat?”

It seemed like the receptionist’s surprise was *good* surprise. Mercedes wasn’t quite sure what ranks were, but she assumed they had to be a measure of strength that matched job difficulties. She snatched the card away from the dazed receptionist and read what was written on it:

[Mercedes Calvert]

Primary Affinity: Earth Secondary Affinity: Wind

Arm Strength: Level 5

Leg Strength: Level 5

Endurance: Level 5

Stamina: Level 4

Magic: Level 2

Agility: Level 5

Regeneration: Level 6

Based on the receptionist’s reaction, they were probably good numbers. But



since they were in the single digits, Mercedes couldn't help but think it made her look like a weakling. She got the sense that she was strong, but she had no basis for comparison, and so for now, she resolved to take the safe and easy route of just asking, "Are these numbers really so surprising?"

"I...lost my composure there, huh? Sorry, darling. To explain, well, most Seekers have stats at either level one or two. A one is amateur, and a two is proficient, I suppose. Anything above a three is top class, hun."

"Just for reference, what level is the strongest person in this guild?"

"That's personal info, so I've gotta keep it confidential. Let's just say you'd be able to pull off an A Rank job, no hassle."

So, her stats really were high. It was definitely preferable to them being low, so she decided to just be content with the results. The five years she spent training hadn't been for naught.

"Well, now that card's yours, hun. This is just my opinion, but stats like those on an F Rank card's enough to get me teary-eyed. You've gotta work hard and raise your rank. An F Rank just doesn't suit you."

"No, I plan to start with easy work. I need to learn the basics."

"Aren't you a careful one."

"I'm just a coward. So, what jobs are there?"

No matter her stats, Mercedes was a novice with zero experience. It was good to have confidence, but that could easily become *overconfidence*. No matter how much of an amazing pro you were, even a tiny pebble could trip you if that confidence grew to hubris. For today, she wouldn't push herself. She'd simply get a feel for what it was like on the job. She felt like that was the proper way to get the ball rolling.

"F Rank jobs are on the board over there. Feel free to take your pick, hun."

"Got it. I'll be back."

The receptionist gestured to the board's location, and Mercedes headed over to find a corkboard pinned with requests. She read through the jobs to see if she could find anything suitable.

[Capture Werwolf Blaus]

Client: Half Moon Pet Shop

Reward: 20,000 Yerks

Time Limit: None

Details: Blaus are quite small, weak, and docile among werwolfs and are popular as pets. We've sold out, and so we'd like someone to capture more. If you can bring us both males and females, we will double the reward.

According to reports, werwolf blaus can be found in the Stark and Practis Dungeons.

[Stark Dungeon, Fountain Survey]

Client: Seekers' Guild

Reward: 8,000 Yerks

Time Limit: Two Weeks

Details: The fountain on the second floor of Stark Dungeon may have healing powers. Please retrieve a water sample for research.

[Stark Dungeon, Mapping]

Client: Seekers' Guild

Reward: 5,000~ Yerks

Time Limit: One Week

Details: The recently appearing Stark Dungeon has yet to be fully mapped. We ask that you work on one to bring it to a quick completion.

Those were the three requests that Mercedes had her eyes on. They all specified the same dungeon, which meant that she could work on the map while searching for the fountain and capture any werwolf blaus she found while she was at it. She took all three of them off the wall and brought them to the front desk.

"I'd like to take on these three."

"My, you're doing three at a time?"

"I believe I should be able to manage them concurrently."

“Given your skills, darling, I don’t think it’ll be a problem. Do you wanna rent any gear? They’re cheap, y’know? Of course, you’ll have to pay for any damages, though.”

“I’ll pass.”

“Huh. Well, here. This map marks the location of Stark Dungeon. It’s about a five-hour walk from the city. We’ve got carriages headed there, so you can just ride one of those. We distribute these for free, so feel free to take it with you, hun.”

After accepting those three jobs, Mercedes exited the guild. She took a map, parchment for mapping, and a pen with her, but she had refused any weapons. It was nice that equipment was offered so cheaply, but she didn’t even have the money to borrow right now.

After that, she stayed in town and headed for the Half Moon Pet Shop. Before departing from the city, she wanted to assess her client’s business. Depending on the shop’s size and location, she’d need to adjust her method of delivery for the werwolf blaus she captured.

*Still...*

This truly was a country of vampires. While the city resembled a human one, it was littered with sights that seemed to defy nature. There was a stray cat with bat wings sprouting from its back, and while it was normal for upper-class ladies to stop and chat in town, one held a leash with a wolfman on the other end. He was short in stature at about 160 centimeters tall, and his fur was blue. Mercedes concluded he must have been one of the werwolf blaus she was searching for. The stalls outside had vials of blood lined up right next to healing potions.

However, Mercedes was one of these vampires, so she had no choice but to grow accustomed to these things. As discrepancies between this world and the common sense of her old life butted heads in her mind, she eventually arrived at the shop.

## Chapter 5: Her First Job

Upon stepping inside the Half Moon Pet Shop, Mercedes found the place to be surprisingly clean. The baby animals inside the glass cases were even cuter than she'd expected, and they were no bigger than full-grown cats and dogs of her old world. Even the biggest was only the size of a large dog. It was hard not to think that they would only be this way as babies, but they were the perfect size for loving regardless.

Of course, though, they were all monsters. A black puppy with strikingly red eyes was labeled as a hellhound, and in the case next to it was a three-headed dog labeled as a cerberus. The two-headed dog with the tail of a snake was an orthrus, and the animal with dark-green fur that otherwise looked like a normal dog was apparently something known as a cù-sìth. They were famous mythical beasts, but as babies, they were actually quite adorable.

Many Seekers kept pets like these as adventuring companions. As Mercedes left the store, she decided to consider buying one for herself once she could afford it. Her next destination was Stark Dungeon, which was thirty-six kilometers away. Humans and vampires walked at mostly the same speed, making her pace roughly seven kilometers per hour. Considering the receptionist had told her it was about a five-hour walk, the math added up. A carriage could travel at ten kilometers per hour, so she could reach Stark Dungeon in about three and a half. It sounded slow, but only express carriages could travel faster.

However, taking a carriage would result in a seven-hour round trip, so it would be noon by the time she returned. Thus, Mercedes decided to shorten the distance on her own two feet. Upon exiting the city, she warmed up with some stretching before checking the map. Then, she put it away and kicked hard into the ground. A blast of wind gusted behind her as she accelerated at blindingly fast speeds. Her surroundings rushed by behind her as she jumped over the rocks or trees that would occasionally block her path. When there were many obstacles, she would activate befreien to suspend herself in the air



to simply dash through.

She felt like the main character of an action game, and she enjoyed the experience while maintaining her top speed as she headed for the dungeon. Her current limit was about 1,150 kilometers per hour. Any more than that and the recoil would cause needless damage.

Most likely, this was the sound barrier. But as she currently had no way of crossing it without risk, it was her current limit. Still, being able to traverse over a thousand kilometers in a single hour was more than sufficient. In just 120 seconds—a mere two minutes—she arrived at Stark Dungeon. Further minimizing the time lost due to obstacles would have gotten her there even faster, but it was still a passing mark.

“Well then...” Mercedes surveyed her surroundings. She seemed to be in a field. It would make for a perfect napping spot... Well, sleeping here would expose you to bugs, so perhaps it wasn’t quite perfect.

Off in the distance, she could see a small settlement. She assumed it was a waypoint constructed for Seekers, since she had read in a book that rest stations were built around the dungeons so that Seekers could take breaks as they explored. However, Mercedes wasn’t tired, so she currently had no need to stop by.

She then turned to look at the dungeon. The lone stone entrance against the plains made for a discordant sight, but she assumed this was probably how all dungeons were. It seemed that this one was the type with a ground-level entrance that led deeper and deeper underground.

After observing it, Mercedes took out the pen and parchment provided by the guild for mapping and stepped foot in the dungeon. It was...a stereotypical stone labyrinth, the kind of image that the word “dungeon” tends to call to mind. Each footstep echoed ominously in the nearly pitch black halls. The only light source was the moonlight that slipped in through the entrance. Once she had turned the corner, though, black was all she could see.

Mercedes knew she had made a mistake. She made a note to bring a lantern next time. Even vampires were blind in complete darkness; they had the ability to see with little light, but not *no* light.

With no other option, Mercedes left the dungeon, snapped off some of the more robust branches from the surrounding trees, and then went back in. She put two of those sticks together in a cross and pulled the one in her left hand back quickly in an attempt to start a friction fire. Things didn't go so well at first, but after some trial and error, the sticks began to grow hotter, and eventually, flames spurted forth.

"This should be good."

With that, she now had a basic light source. The torch wouldn't last long, but she surmised she would be able to complete her exploring before that point. But even then, trying to explore and map a dungeon with fire in one hand was even more troublesome than she had predicted. When she needed to draw, she reduced the gravitational field around her torch to have it float in the air, but this method was terribly inefficient. When she'd later buy a lantern, she wanted one that could be affixed to her arm.

She continued this process until her sticks had nearly run out. With nothing left to do, she tossed them on the ground and stepped on them to stifle the flame. Then, she began to ponder what to do next.

"This isn't great."

She quickly realized that she needed to adjust her methodology. Within the darkness, she closed her eyes and racked her brains, but no ideas came to her. If she were able to use fire magic, she wouldn't have to worry about light, but unfortunately, her affinity was earth. There was no point in thinking about what-ifs.

"Wind...wasn't it?" She recalled that her affinities had been written on the card she had received upon becoming a Seeker. One was earth, but the other was wind. She wasn't looking to figure out her secondary affinity, but learning of it had been a godsend. She began to consider whether there was any way wind magic could help her out of her predicament. She had never used it before, but now that she knew it was one of her affinities, she felt like she was on the verge of a light bulb moment.

As Mercedes ruminated, she heard a pebble fall far off in the distance. Her hearing was much better than it had been when she was human, allowing her

to pick up on the faintest of sounds with focus. Hearing that had inspired a moment of ingenuity in her.

“I guess it’s worth a try.”

Now that she knew one of her affinities was wind, she felt—no, *knew*—that she would be able to pick up on the wind’s power much more easily than before. She sucked in a breath and accumulated its power in her throat. As she did so, she thought about sound. In her mind, she drew a picture of the vibrations spreading in the air from her throat and blowing like wind throughout the dungeon before returning back to her.

She let out a sound wave almost assuredly imperceptible to humans as she focused her senses on her hearing. Based on the direction the waves returned from and the time elapsed, she was able to visualize the dungeon’s structure in her head. Once that mental map had been drawn, she quickly lit a fire and transferred it to the parchment. Of course, she couldn’t draw the whole dungeon at once, but the process had become a lot easier. With enough repetition, she’d be able to get there.

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Thirty minutes passed as Mercedes moved around the dungeon and sent out vibration after vibration. She had achieved an almost complete map on her parchment. While she had found the steps that led to the next floor, she decided to ignore them for now. Finishing the map came first.

She let out the last vibrations she’d need on this floor and listened to their echo. However, she suddenly sensed a large mass approaching her. Alongside its reverberating footsteps, what eventually appeared before her was a large, bipedal, mole-like creature. It stood about two meters tall, with an injury across its left eye, and it bared its fangs intimidatingly. It definitely wasn’t here to have a friendly chat.

Mercedes was only about 130 centimeters tall, so she had to look straight up to see the towering monster’s face. During her previous peaceful life in Japan, the only time she had seen any animals significantly larger than herself was in zoos, where her safety was guaranteed. It was only natural to be overwhelmed, but even Mercedes oddly never felt like she was in danger.

“I see. This really is like your average fantasy. I knew I’d need to fight if I became a Seeker.”

She threw her precious light source—her sticks—onto the ground and tossed her almost complete map behind her. Then, she assumed a battle stance and squared up the mole. While it was a “battle stance,” it was limited by the fact that she was a novice with no real martial arts experience. All she did was turn her shoulder toward her foe and her body away. Basically, it was a stance in name only and practically meaningless.

Mercedes also lacked technique. You can’t rely on what you don’t have; therefore she couldn’t rely on skill. In essence, she had to fight with her physical strength alone.

Still, there was merit in this. If she could fight using her novice abilities, it would prove that the years she had spent training weren’t pointless.

“Come. I’ll use you to test my strength.”

“Graaaaawr!”

Mercedes urged the mole forward with her hand, and it responded with a growl. She watched its claws swing down toward her, feeling oddly calm, and lightly took hold of one of them, rendering it powerless. It was now a simple contest of strength, but the mole couldn’t move its arms at all. No matter how much it struggled, it couldn’t escape the grasp of Mercedes’s thin arms. All it could do was tremble.

On the other hand, Mercedes maintained her composure as she strengthened her grip, causing the claw in her hand to crack. With a bit more force, she tried moving it downward. The mole’s whole arm came with it, and soon, it was forced to bow before her.

“Rawr!”

The mole used its free claw to swing at Mercedes, but she easily caught it. Next, the mole opened its mouth and lunged at her shoulder. In response, she simply tensed up there and let it bite her. The mole couldn’t even penetrate her skin with its sharp fangs, much less lodge them in her flesh. No matter how hard it clenched its jaw, her shoulder was so firm it was like trying to bite through

iron.

Watching him, Mercedes realized the vast difference in their power. Thinking that dragging the battle out any longer would just be cruel, she decided to put the mole out of its misery.

For just a moment, though, she hesitated. This might have been a barbarous beast, but it was still a living being, and she had her qualms when it came to taking its life. However, that was it. She buried her foot into its unguarded stomach as if to fling aside her own weakness. Her kick was so powerful it crushed the mole's stomach. Blood spurted from its mouth as it moved away from Mercedes's shoulder. At the same time, she let go of the mole with her right arm and formed a fist. The dull tone of creaking bones reverberated as her blood vessels bulged out of her arms.

Then, she went in for the final blow. A crack opened in the floor below as she stepped forward. The mole's fangs flew into the air alongside its blood. It broke through the wall behind it as it launched into the opposite hallway, again pummeling through another wall and into *that* hallway. It only stopped once it had slammed into a third wall, collapsing onto the floor with the whites of its eyes exposed.

The mole didn't even exhibit the twitch of death.

"Is it...dead? Did I kill it?"

She had just killed a living creature. With that realization, she closed her eyes in silent prayer. She noticed her arm was trembling, and she couldn't help but laugh. She was glad. It was only slightly, but taking a life had shaken her. There was still humanity in her frozen heart.

"I wonder if I'll eventually get so used to it I'll lose that feeling..." She wiped the sweat from her brow with a derisive grin. This was what one had to do to live in this world—kill. She wondered if her heart would eventually grow paralyzed and the diluted humanity she still had would further leave her.

Still, it had been her decision entirely, and she had no intention of turning back from the path she'd chosen. She would head forward. She would make no stops. There was still the road ahead.



Done with her map, she went straight down the stairs to the second floor.

## Chapter 6: Laying the Groundwork II

As Mercedes wandered around mapping the dungeon's second floor, a group of vampires approached her from behind. They were quite a large group, numbering thirteen. The halls of dungeons were narrow, making them ill fit for large parties. However, it seemed like this group knew as much, as they made sure to keep a proper distance from one another to avoid hindering their movements. Mercedes concluded that they were well accustomed to dungeons, and thus, had to be fellow Seekers.

"Huh? What's a brat like you doing here?" The head of this group spotted Mercedes and immediately belittled her. Contempt filled his countenance, and it was clear that he viewed himself as above her. Vampires placed their faith in strength, and accordingly, treated the weak harshly. "I dunno how you wandered all the way here, but you better know your place. The dungeons aren't a playground. You don't even have a torch with you! The sundry shop on Sache Street's got long-lasting candle lanterns. They're a good deal. Take this torch and get outta here."

He forced the torch on Mercedes and commanded her to leave, even going so far as to shoo her away with his hand. She found him insufferable.

"When you're a newbie, you gotta get some monster repellent and do simple jobs. Focus on making some cash. You'll regret it later if you don't. Not that you'll listen anyway. Know your place, brat." It was now a different man's turn to ridicule her. He walked off without even sparing her a glance.

"Hold on now, you don't even got any equipment! You think the dungeons are a joke? Go ask one of the factories in district four for a pipe. They take pity on brats like you, so you might even be able to get them to make you a spear. It'll be cheaper than buying weapons as a beginner. Not that it has anything to do with you. This is no place for clueless newbies."

After sharing that unsolicited advice, the group of Seekers left. Mercedes was sure they were headed deeper into the dungeons, and based on their numbers,

she could tell they were serious.

They may have disparaged her, but there was some truth in their words. She was just a neophyte, unable to discern what set them apart from herself. It was too early for her to follow in their footsteps. Recognizing as much, she returned to her work.

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By the time Mercedes returned to town, it was already eleven o'clock in the morning. The sun shone high in the sky, and with it being so late in the morning, the majority of households were fast asleep. Humans would have said "early in the morning," but for vampires, "late in the morning" was more accurate.

The town was bustling at night, but now, all was quiet. Still, the Seekers' Guild operated twenty-four hours a day. Mercedes stepped inside the building flanked by a blue werwolf she led with a rope.

Compared to the giant mole she had fought earlier, werwolf blaus were much more docile. One look at her, and its will to fight had completely vanished.

"Oh my, that was quick. Are you giving up?"

"Of course not. You don't see what's behind me?"

Considering the commute time, Mercedes was back too early. The receptionist had assumed she was throwing in the towel, but boy, was he wrong. She handed him a complete map of the first two floors of Stark Dungeon, a vial of water taken from the second floor, and a werwolf blaus she had captured on her way out.

"My! I'm shocked. What magic got you back so quickly, hun?"

"Real magic."

"Oh, that's right. One of your affinities was wind. But can fliegen really get you back so fast? Well, I guess it doesn't matter as long as you've completed your jobs. Here's your reward, hun." With that, the receptionist handed her a ten-thousand-yerk bill and four one-thousand-yerk bills. The former kind was the largest bill the country had, and on it was the portrait of a great historical figure, a man with a sunken face. Mercedes recalled reading in a book that he

had been the first king to establish a nation of vampires.

“Your map was well done, so I added on a bonus. Keep at it, girl.”

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Mercedes returned to town the following night. As an aside, to the people in this world—or really, just the vampires—a day began at midnight and ended at noon. Thus, each day began in the dead of night, and once the sun rose, it was over. Vampires thrived in the moonlight, and the town bathed in this quiet glow was as loud and bustling as always.

Mercedes first visited a general store. It sold daily necessities, but some of these could prove useful in her adventures. Her first priority was a lantern. It was glass-covered with a candle situated inside, and with just one stick, the light could last for two hours. Candles were sold separately in packs of ten. A lantern was a useful item, as it could be used indefinitely as long as there were new candles to replace the old ones. She placed one lantern and three packs of candles in her basket and moved on to the next item on her list: shoes.

Being a Seeker required plenty of walking, oftentimes on rugged ground, so cheap shoes would break in an instant. The pair Mercedes currently wore had already reached the limits of their use after just one day of work. So, she picked a sturdy pair made from dragon hide. According to the placard next to the item, they were made from the skin of the “lesser dragon” species and boasted high durability and water resistance. The toes were affixed with bones from the same dragon to protect the tips of the wearer’s feet. They seemed like a safe, reliable pair, so she decided to buy a spare and threw two pairs in her basket before moving on to the next item.

Next was clothes. She wanted attire that was durable and could get dirty. The dress she currently had was flimsy and ill-equipped for dungeoneering. After careful examination, she decided on a white shirt and a dragon hide vest to wear over it. For her lower half, she went with a pair of shorts that would be easy to move in and a pair of leggings to protect her knees. Lastly, she bought a black coat to protect her against the cold.

Finally, she headed to the grocery section. Of course, she was looking for preserved foods that could last her a while. Ideally, she’d be able to find meal

replacement bars that were nutritional and could easily be carried like snacks, but she knew that she probably wouldn't be able to find anything like that. Instead, she set her sights on chocolate. It was often regarded as nothing more than a sweet treat, but it was famously a suitable choice for emergency rations. She could be in the dungeons for days, so she wanted provisions to take with her. If they had any canned goods, she planned on purchasing them as well.

However, her hopes were shattered. Or rather, they'd been too high in the first place. Since it was obvious they wouldn't have any nutrition bars, of course they didn't have any canned goods either.

This wasn't because this world was culturally underdeveloped. First, the kind of meal replacement bars Mercedes sought had only first appeared in stores in the 1980s. Obviously, this world wouldn't have such an advanced food creation. Similarly, canned goods had only been invented in England in the year 1810, long after the Middle Ages.

Chocolate had a long history, but even then, the drink that served as the prototype for its modern form only appeared in Europe after the year 1519, and it only spread in Spain. Chocolate as we know it today wasn't invented until the eighteenth century.

So, what *did* serve as the emergency rations and long-shelf-life provisions of this world? The answer lined the shelves before Mercedes in red bottles: blood. Considering this was a country of vampires, that should have been obvious. Blood was a vampire's favorite drink. She was somewhat skeptical that they'd really be able to preserve blood for so long, but considering such an item was being sold before her eyes, they must have figured it out somehow. Anything was possible in fantasies.

Of course, vampires didn't only consume blood. They'd eat vegetables, fruit, and meat as well. However, blood was undeniably the most efficient food they could consume. Mercedes herself had tried it before, of course. As a vampire, she had to drink it, and she knew she would one day have to grow accustomed to doing so—but she could just never get used to the taste.

Yes, the blood was delicious. To a vampire, blood always tasted sweet on the tongue. But she despised the part of her that found it so delectable. Thus, she



convinced herself that blood just wasn't for her and began to hold somewhat of an antipathy toward it.

Therefore, Mercedes never drank more blood than she absolutely needed. She had told the maid to keep quiet whenever she mixed blood into their food. Knowing there was blood interfered with her taste buds and caused them to reject the taste. Tragically, as long as she was ignorant, her instincts interpreted the taste of blood as appetizing. While her mind may have thought otherwise, blood was what her body desired.

Mercedes was surprised to find that she had given up too early. After perusing the aisles, she discovered some cocoa beans. However, given they were hidden away in a corner, they didn't seem to be too popular. She couldn't help but scowl.

*How can they treat an item that was a luxury back on Earth like this? There was even a time when it was used in place of money! This may be a fantasyland, but has no one really recognized its value?*

The chocolate we're familiar with made its debut in the later half of the eighteenth century, but cocoa was viewed as a luxury item even before then. A drink made from cocoa powder melted in water mixed with vanilla and cornmeal had long been enjoyed, and it was through gradual improvements to this original concoction that chocolate became what we know it as today. Mercedes was shocked to find it being sold for a bargain in this world.

*I heard that drinks made from cocoa were once used as medicine or tonics. Since vampires get all their nutrients from blood, maybe there wasn't any need for it? That might be why it never gained popularity.*

No matter how long she spent thinking about it, she was never going to find an answer. Still, there had to be some explanation beyond her understanding. In any case, all she knew for certain was that there was treasure before her being sold so cheaply it almost seemed like a prank. Based on the price, cocoa beans clearly weren't viewed as valuable.

*There's a lot I could say about this, but let's just accept it as a windfall. If all goes well, I might be able to make a pretty penny.*

They say money doesn't grow on trees, but such a tree was standing before

her, and no one around seemed to notice its golden glow. Just how much money could she make if she played her cards right? For now, that didn't matter. If others didn't even afford it a glance, she would use it herself. With that in mind, she tossed the cocoa beans into her bag. Next, she grabbed some sugar. Unfortunately, there wasn't any milk, so she'd have to hit up another store.

She found what looked like a mortar, so she decided to purchase that too. "Mortar" wasn't the name of the item, but no matter the nation, cooking utensils tended to take on similar shapes. She continued on to grab a pot and a thin stick. She planned to use them later.

Mercedes was happy to find something similar to vanilla. It had a long history as a spice, and even the people of this other world seemed to have realized its value. Lastly, she wanted to find something that could be used for cooling. There wouldn't be any refrigerators, but she thought she might be able to find something able to serve the same purpose.

After wandering around, she found an aisle labeled "Magic Stones."

"Excuse me. What are 'magic stones'?"

"Is this your first time seeing them? You see, these are rocks with magic sealed inside to allow everyone to use magic easily."

Hearing the shopkeeper's explanation, Mercedes was impressed that such a convenient tool existed. It seemed like worlds with magic had some unique inventions. She searched for a magic stone imbued with the power of ice and found multiple ones fitting that description. According to the shopkeeper, more expensive meant greater effects. Just as she had assumed, they were primarily used in battle. However, she chose the cheapest option and purchased both an ice tray and an insular box.

After leaving the general store, Mercedes then headed for a cattle ranch. She'd heard that as long as she paid for it, she'd be able to get her hands on some freshly squeezed milk. Hearing the word "cattle," she had imagined a black-and-white Holstein cow, but what she found inside the rancher's pens were black-and-white bipedal cow monsters.

"What *are* they?"

“Huh? Is this your first time seeing a minotaur, young lady?”

The rancher seemed to pay no mind to the appearance of the bipedal creatures as he squeezed some milk out of them. Seeing the cows stand on two legs and moo as they spurted out white liquid to fill buckets, Mercedes felt like she was watching a scene straight from hell. If she spent some time searching, she might be able to find a normal cow, but at the very least, this was how they got milk in the city.

She knew that thinking about the minotaurs too much would leave her completely speechless, so she did her best to ignore the two-legged animals as she bought her milk and brought her purchases back home.

She'd have to shift her plans. She had wanted to return to the dungeons as soon as she'd gotten her things in order, but now, something else would have to come first. Still, getting that out of the way would make conquering dungeons even easier, so in that sense, this was just another necessary preparation.

## Chapter 7: Straying off Course

As soon as Mercedes had returned home with her cocoa beans, she got to work trying to create chocolate. It produced quite a strong accompanying smell, but she'd just have to get used to that.

Her mother had asked her, "What in the world are you going to do with so many cocoa beans?" but Mercedes was certain she'd change her tune once she saw the finished product. Apparently, cocoa beans had a dedicated group of fans in this world who viewed them as a luxury. Their powerful aroma meant that few vampires liked them, but there were some who would melt them in hot water and mix in red pepper flakes to mask the scent and enjoy them that way.

Now, she understood why their popularity had never spread. Vampires had a much sharper sense of smell than humans, so they tended to avoid any strong odors.

First, Mercedes roasted the beans in an oven she had set up outside. Ovens in this world were typically brick structures built outdoors. As the beans roasted, she washed a round, well-sized rock, shaved it down with a file, and formed it into her desired shape through earth magic. She then made two round balls and used earth magic to open up a small hole in their centers. Long live magic!

Then, she attached the two balls together with a thin rod inside a pot. After confirming that the two rollers would scrape the pot's bottom when they rotated, she engineered the device a bit more to adjust its movement. Essentially, she was trying to recreate the commercial mixers she had seen on the internet during her past life.

Once she finally determined that her version would do as a makeshift replacement, she got to work. After the beans had been roasted to perfection, she winnowed them, peeled off the shells, and tossed them into the mortar. She then had to weigh these to figure out the proper balance between nibs and sugar. Once that was done, she began to beat the nibs with a mallet. As there

were no convenient machines she could use, she had to do this by hand. It required tenacity and perseverance, but it was nothing a vampiric body couldn't handle.

Once the nibs had been thoroughly smashed, she transferred them into the mortar and began to grind them down. The most grueling part of the process—refining—came once this turned to liquid. The refining process could take thirty to forty hours in a machine, but obviously, she didn't have that luxury. To get a really smooth texture, it wasn't rare for the cocoa butter to be refined for seventy hours or more.

Mercedes transferred the muddy cocoa butter to her pot and let out some wind magic. With her newfound affinity, she could continuously rotate specific objects. Still, this was limited to small items, and it had no offensive capability, so it couldn't be used in a fight. However, by sacrificing offensive power and focusing on sustainability, the spell could last for quite a long time. Until the magic wore off, the refining process could happen automatically.

At the same time, she skipped the refining process entirely for half of the cocoa butter and immediately heated it with water. On one hand, she was testing which batch would taste better. On the other, it was obvious that skipping steps would negatively affect the taste.

Mercedes spent that night training to pass the time. When she woke up the following night, she found that her mixer had stopped, which meant the refining process was complete. Her wind magic had lasted about twenty-four hours.

She added milk and sugar to this sticky mixture and once again heated it over the fire until it liquefied. Then, she transferred this into a bowl which she submerged into cold water to cool—she had made this using her magic stones imbued with ice.

Once that was done, she again heated it in warm water to temper it. As much as she wanted a thermometer, they didn't exist in this world, so her only option was to use her senses and take her best guess.

Finally, she transferred the liquid into her ice tray to cool into bite-size pieces. She had wanted a chocolate bar mold, but this would have to do. She tossed

some of her ice magic stones into the box she had bought earlier to make a simple fridge. Then, she placed the ice tray inside to cool the chocolate.

For a short while, she passed the time training. Then, she tossed one of the completed chocolates in her mouth. The texture was a far cry from even the cheapest candy bars of her old world, and the taste had plenty of room for improvement. It was rather brittle and fell apart as soon as it entered her mouth. Quite honestly, it was disgusting.

Still, looking on the bright side—which took great effort—she had managed to make a product that could be called “chocolate,” even if the result differed little from the batch where she skipped the refining and tempering process entirely. She was just a novice trying to use the scant info she had gleaned from the internet. Considering that processing chocolate was difficult even for pros, it was unimaginable that a novice like her could produce a fine result just by copying them.

In the end, she concluded that the only thing necessary was grinding the nibs in the mortar and hardening what resulted.

“Well, you can’t aim too high as a beginner.” Mercedes admitted her defeat to no one before wrapping her chocolate in paper and storing it in her makeshift cooler.

Afterward, she tried adjusting the recipe in all sorts of ways and discovered that the chocolate lasted longer if she didn’t add milk. It was unfortunate that the milk ended up being so pointless, but considering it came from minotaurs, perhaps it was better not to drink.

Even so, the chocolate melted quite easily, so she decided to make something akin to a chocolate cookie by grinding it into powder and cooking it into bread. As the process continued, it moved further and further away from her original concept, but since she had succeeded in creating shelf-stable provisions, that could be overlooked.

“They do say that failure is the mother of success.”

It wasn’t like Mercedes was unwilling to accept defeat. Not at all.

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After returning to the Seekers' Guild, Mercedes decided to accept another job to map Stark Dungeon. Rather than making money, her two main goals this time lay completely in the dungeons.

Her first objective was to find a dungeoneering partner. She was currently working solo, but she had no intentions of gathering comrades or joining a party. A partner she was well acquainted with was one thing, but she didn't want to entrust her safety to someone she had met just the day before—or even just *today*. Seekers were rough and wild fellows who made money at the expense of their own lives. She couldn't guarantee that someone blinded by greed wouldn't betray her; such cases were far from rare.

Others couldn't be trusted, but at the same time, there was a limit to how far she could go solo. She was fine for now, but with more numbers, she'd be able to do more. No matter how hard she worked, she only had two arms. Her first priority was finding labor she could order around, which was why she aimed to capture a monster in Stark Dungeon. If she could find one, she wanted something rather intelligent that had agile control of its arms. A werewolf like the type she had captured for the pet shop the other day would be suitable as well. Upon trying to train the one she had gotten her hands on, she'd realized that despite their appearance, they were dogs at heart. If she made it clear who was boss, they'd obediently listen to her, and since they walked on two legs, they were much more clever than dogs. They could make for quite effective pack animals.

Now that she had the proper attire, Mercedes planned to venture farther into the dungeon than last time to do her mapping. Thankfully, her lantern was working properly as well.

She encountered no monsters on the first floor, but once she moved onto the second, she came face-to-face with a snake monster. It was over ten meters tall, similar to the reticulated pythons she had seen online in her past life. The snake lunged at her, and she responded by grabbing both its neck and tail and tying them together. She made sure to pull the knot snug, but she fully expected that the snake would untangle itself eventually.

Mercedes continued on with her mapping until she met another monster. This time, it was a 180-centimeter-tall rat that walked on two legs. As soon as

she caught sight of the rodent, she kicked the ground and launched her elbow into its chest. That alone was enough to reduce it to an immobile object lying on the floor.

*A rat, huh? It was walking on two feet, but it didn't seem very smart. I doubt it's too skilled with its hands either.* Realizing the defeated rat monster wasn't suitable for capture, she ignored it and continued deeper into the dungeon.

After a short while, Mercedes encountered another monster blocking her path. This one was a skeleton wielding a sword and shield. It had fangs, leading her to conclude it must have been a vampire when it was alive. Still, without flesh, it didn't necessarily retain the power and speed of one. In terms of intelligence, it was moving despite not having a brain, which didn't quite make sense, but given that this was a common occurrence in fantasy settings, she would have to overlook it.

She kicked through its bones with no hesitation and seized its sword and shield. It was a pleasant windfall; she had planned on making a spear out of monster bones and monster fangs, but this one had been kind enough to bring her a weapon himself.

She gave the sword a swing to confirm that it would hold up against her strength. The shield was too big for her, and she had to hang the lantern from one of her arms anyway, so she decided to toss it. Given her size, the sword would be considered a long sword as well, but since she could wield it with one hand, it posed no issues. Still, it had gotten harder to draw her maps. She really did need to find someone or something to hold her bags soon.

Mercedes headed down to the third floor. That's when she heard a scream in the distance. It didn't sound like a monster, but instead, a fellow vampire.

She rushed toward the sound's source. Thankfully, the path wasn't convoluted, so she arrived at the scene quickly. It was a gruesome one. A pile of vampires lay in a pool of blood, their swords and armor smashed. Among the group, one had been injured so severely it was clear he was dead.

Mercedes recognized them. They were the veteran Seekers she had encountered in the dungeon just the other day. The man who she assumed had let out the scream was thin to the bone and completely unarmored. Based on

his attire, he seemed to be a merchant, and most likely, those collapsed around him had been his guards.

Towering before him was a humanoid monster over two and a half meters tall. A horn sprouted from its forehead, but most striking was the fact it had six arms. Each one carried a weapon, and given how buff the monster appeared, it seemed incredibly strong.

*It's an ogre!*

Mercedes juxtaposed the monster's physique with her memories and determined the name of the beast. Its appearance matched a description she had read in a book about monsters.

Ogres lay in wait for Seekers in the deepest parts of dungeons, blocking their paths. Their stout arms exceeded even the most trained vampires, and their steellike skin was so robust cheap blades couldn't pierce it. They were also quite intelligent. Among humanoid monsters, they were considered some of the most dangerous. Not to mention, the six arms on the one before her suggested it was of the Asura variety—the most dangerous kind of ogre there was.

Still, Mercedes had never seen any illustration or photograph of an ogre in the books she read, so she wasn't certain. She really had to complain about the lack of pictures in the books of this world. There was no way paintings and illustrations weren't a part of their culture at all.

Well, that could wait. The most salient problem she faced was that this (assumed) ogre was swinging one of his swords down at the man. Mercedes, of course, had no intention of letting him die right in front of her eyes. She jumped right into the scene, kicking the (assumed) ogre's arm away and knocking his attack off course. The man was saved, and the sword fell from the (assumed) ogre's—this is getting obnoxious, so let's just call it an ogre—the ogre's hands, causing it to freeze and examine the intruder.

"What are you?" The ogre could apparently talk. It sounded as gruff as it looked, but the tone was tinged with caution. It watched the small intruder closely.

"I'm a Seeker. I came to this dungeon to complete a mapping job, but I can't

just overlook what's happening here, so I decided I needed to step in.”

Mercedes assumed a half-baked stance with the sword she had just obtained and glared down at the ogre.

Her opponent had six arms and five weapons since her surprise attack had caused him to drop one. She was clearly outnumbered. Figuring out how to work around this disadvantage would be key in winning this battle.



“How foolish,” spat the ogre before swinging his sword. Mercedes quickly flung her lantern at the merchant and twisted up the corners of her mouth as she casually deflected the ogre’s sword with a swing of her own.

The ogre gasped in surprise, but it immediately segued into its next attack, this time using two arms. Still, more wasn’t always better in a fight. It thrust two swords forward toward her heart, but with a small adjustment of her body, she was able to dodge the blow. Instead, she trapped both of those arms between her armpits.

Next, the ogre swung down another of its swords from above, though Mercedes was able to stop the blow by grabbing it with her fist. Then, she forced open the ogre’s fingers, causing the sword to fall to the ground. She picked it up for herself, and now that she was dual-wielding, she backstepped to put some distance between them.

“Now it’s three weapons against two. I should be able to win.”

Despite Mercedes’s taunt, the ogre remained silent, though the sweat that traced its face spoke louder than words. Her youthful appearance had tricked him, but that wouldn’t serve as an excuse. The ogre strengthened its guard, focused its senses, and glared at her. He wouldn’t be so careless any longer, as he now knew that he was facing a foe more formidable than appearances would suggest.

Both fighters kicked off from the ground. Blade met blade, sending sparks into the air. The clanging of metal reverberated as they repositioned themselves faster than the eye could follow.

The bout lasted a mere five seconds, but it felt like minutes. In the end, a single sword flew in the air before piercing the ground.

“Now it’s two against two.”

“Grrr...”

They were now evenly matched. The fight resumed, but this time, Mercedes clearly had the advantage. The ogre tried to get his teeth in her in any way he could, attacking with his now weaponless arms. However, she matched him, breaking through his fists with kicks or smashing through with the hilt of her

sword. He was completely powerless against her.

A blade once again flew through the air. Now, the ogre held only one weapon.

“And now, it’s two against one.”

“Grrrrrrrrr!” bellowed the ogre. He swung his sword with a newfound speed. However, this short fight was enough for Mercedes to discern his attack patterns. She didn’t bother to block, instead dodging every swing with perfect calm.

Then, she counterattacked. She brought her sword high into the air and knocked the ogre’s final sword to the ground with a swing before sparing no instant in bringing her blade to his throat, rendering him powerless.

“I’ve won...yes?”

“Yes. I have lost.” All six of his blades had been knocked from his hand, with his opponent’s pointed to his throat. Defeat was the only way to describe this outcome. The ogre resignedly admitted his subjugation and fell to his knees.



## Chapter 8: Her First Comrade

After losing his battle with Mercedes, the ogre's hostility vanished. Instead, he knelt on the ground and prostrated his head before her as if accepting his death. He was the splitting image of a vassal subservient to his master, and it left her perplexed.

"How noble. Even though you admitted victory was mine, I was expecting you to still resist."

"Strength is the ultimate law among us ogres. We show those who have bested us loyalty and respect. You have proven victorious, and thus, you have the right to do with me as you please. Of course, that includes killing me. I will stay true to the way of my species."

Mercedes kept her guard up as she digested the ogre's words. She remembered seeing a passage in a book she once read that relayed something similar: "Ogres are dangerous monsters, but if you can best them in a one-on-one battle, they will serve you loyally for the rest of their lives." The book also included another passage: "However, ogres will only dedicate their loyalty to one person throughout their lives. The first to best them in the fight will be their master, and their fidelity will never shift to another." Thus, even if you bested an ogre, it wouldn't become yours if it already had a master.

*I may have just gotten lucky.* Mercedes didn't place much trust in pledged loyalty from others; people would easily betray in the name of their own greed. However, she thought loyalty pledged by a monster was worth considering, especially since it was bolstered by their instincts. People pledging their allegiance to other people was completely different from the animalistic instinct to be loyal to the leader of its pack; the former may betray, but the latter won't. They may fight over the pack leader position, but an animal would never pretend to be faithful during a hunt only to suddenly turn against their leader.

However, people would. They had the intelligence and greed to do so. Of course, ogres also possessed intelligence, but Mercedes thought there was

merit in testing his loyal instincts. Just as intelligence couldn't completely suppress urges such as hunger, sleep, and sex, if this ogre's instincts to obey the strong overpowered its intelligence, she should at least be able to see some warning signs on the off chance that he was planning to backstab her.

Mercedes drew her sword and looked down at the ogre. There were holes in her defenses, yet he was still. It would be easy to kill him, but that would be a waste if what she had read about ogre loyalty was true.

"Then let me ask you this: will you pledge your allegiance to me? Will you become my arms and legs?"

"If that is your wish."

"All right. Wait there."

"Yes, master."

Mercedes had found someone to carry her bags without even trying. She still couldn't trust him, so she resolved to observe him for a while. But first, she needed to check the merchant's guards. She realized that there was nothing she could do for them, as they had all already passed. Despite vampires' vitality and regeneration abilities, they weren't immortal. In the books from her past life, vampires would revive with lines like "So what if you cut off my head? So what if you stabbed through my heart? Why would that stop me?" but in this world, vampires weren't equipped with such cheat codes.

Unfortunately, the merchant was the only survivor.

"It's over. Can you stand?"

"Y-Yes... Th-Thank you. Thank you very much! I-I thought I was done for..." The merchant trembled as he repeatedly thanked Mercedes. Still, he was in terrible shape. He was so slender he looked like a skeleton, and it had clearly been quite a few days since his last meal.

"From what I can tell, your group consists of you, a merchant, and your guards...though I see the guards are already dead."

"Y-Yes. As you've surmised, I operate a business known as Trein Industries... Have you heard of it?"

“Of course I have. It’s one of the few major corporations that exist in this country.”

Trein Industries was a conglomerate based in the city of Blut and prominent throughout the whole nation. Even the sundry store Mercedes had shopped in just the other day was operated by them. If what he said was true, the man before her was the boss of a major corporation, and such a big shot was currently nearly dead inside this dungeon.

“What happened?”

“Other mercantile companies have been outperforming us lately, and I heard that those who conquered dungeons would receive immense fortune, so I hired the top Seekers in Blut and set off to conquer Stark Dungeon.”

The belief that exploring a dungeon would bring riches was a fairytale spread among Seekers. Those who conquered dungeons actually did return with jewels or other treasures, so it wasn’t completely cock-and-bull, but Seekers believed that mountains of treasures lay in the deepest depths of the dungeons.

“I hired three teams of famous B rank Seekers. Each team had four members, and I am certain they were experienced.”

B was the highest rank of Seeker that could typically be employed. The A ranks above them were mostly privately owned by the government or nobles and thus received jobs directly from them. They were out of reach even for the bosses of major companies, which was why the merchant had hired three teams—a total of twelve B rank Seekers—despite the hefty costs and headed for the dungeons.

“All was progressing smoothly. However...once we surpassed the tenth floor, the strength of the monsters increased dramatically. We still somehow managed to reach the bottom, but we had made the wrong call. We used up all our strength and items just to reach the final floor. My guards then began to drop like flies.” The merchant grabbed his shoulders and shuddered as if reliving it.

Who had been the first to proclaim, “If you’re saying you can keep going, you’ve already reached the point where you should turn back”? Once you have to think about whether you have enough strength to move forward, the alarm

bells are already ringing. If you had come far enough you begin to worry, the best course of action was to turn back. The merchant's group had made the wrong call.

"Those of us who remained immediately decided to retreat. However, the bag carrying our provisions began to weigh us down. Once it seemed the ogre was about to catch up to us, we had to throw it aside."

Mercedes was going to ask whether he had any vials of blood on him, but then she thought better of it. It would be a miracle to have some after all the chaos he had been through. Not only were they fragile, but they also took up space. It was best to assume they had been the first casualties. Even on Earth, the airtight food preservation method of bottling invented by Nicolas Appert of France came before the invention of canning, but one of its drawbacks was how easy it was to damage the container. Canning had been invented precisely because glass bottles were too fragile to make them suitable for long-term storage and carrying over long distances.

"We frantically ran to the top while battling our hunger, but when we finally made it, we encountered a monster which had chased us from the depths."

"The ogre?"

"Yes... Ogres are quite strong, and my Seekers were nearing complete exhaustion. They were completely powerless against the ogre as it eradicated all of them. Had you not appeared, I'd be dead now too."

All twelve Seekers had perished. Hearing this, Mercedes once again realized the importance of gaining comrades of her own. In that sense, she was quite lucky to have defeated that ogre. She figured it had to be one of the weakest varieties since she'd so easily beaten it on her own. It was safe to assume that it was only able to wipe out all twelve Seekers because they were weakened. Still, the ogre should prove helpful in later battles regardless.

"In any case, let's head back to the surface. I'll come with you, and... Hey, ogre. What's your name?"

"I have no name. You may call me what you wish."

Mercedes wasn't a fan of that answer. It meant she'd have to name him

herself. Her first thought was Asura, but considering this was an Asura breed of ogre, that seemed too basic.

*What's a good name for an ogre with lots of weapons? Lots of weapons... It kind of reminds me of Musashibo Benkei.* Mercedes brainstormed for a short while longer, but she couldn't think of anything else. That would be his name. The ogre was huge and had a lot of weapons, but her naming sense was still quite unimaginative. Oddly, though, this name suited him.

"In that case, your name is now Benkei."

"Benkei... It is a good name. I shall remember it."

"Right then, Benkei. Carry those Seekers for me." They were already dead, but Mercedes still wanted to return them to the surface. Thus, she ordered the ogre—rather, Benkei—to bring them outside the dungeon. The Seekers probably weren't too happy about being carried by the monster that had killed them, but it was better than letting their bodies rot inside the dungeon.

"Can you stand, um...?"

"The name's Trein."

"Mr. Trein, then. If you can't, I can lend you my shoulder."

The merchant had apparently named his business after himself. Mercedes tried to urge him up, but he made no move to do so. The long chase and starvation he had endured had deprived him of even enough strength to stand. He was so thin that she was afraid he might starve to death before they reached the surface, so she took some of her wrapped chocolate-cookie-like creations out of her bag and opened them for him.

They were packaged with the type of parchment commonly used throughout the nation, but rather than sheep skin, it was mass-produced using monster skin. It made sense. Who would skin their precious livestock when you could just use the monsters that overflowed from the dungeons? Paper made from plants existed in this world, but it wasn't as common as parchment.

There were many reasons why plant-based paper had replaced parchment on Earth, one of them being cost performance. Parchment was much more laborious and costly to produce. You could only get so much skin from a single

sheep, and it took many to make a single bible. In the Middle Ages, one bible was so valuable it would have cost millions in today's money. Thus, it was only natural that plant-based paper, the cheaper alternative made of more readily available resources, would become the standard. It could even be made from weeds, so as long as a field wasn't so over-farmed as to leave it barren, the ingredients used to make paper were practically limitless.

So, why was parchment the prevailing paper here? At the very least, this world had the technology to make plant-based paper, so it wouldn't be strange if that became the norm. Anyway, Mercedes concluded that the reason was the abundance of resources needed to make parchment.

As previously stated, parchment in this world was not made from sheep skin but monster skin, and the dungeons produced endless monsters. In other words, the material cost of monster parchment was practically zero. There was no need to switch to plant-based paper.

"Eat this. You'll start to feel better."

"Um...this isn't animal droppings, is it?"

"Don't worry. It's not."

What a terrible first impression.

The chocolate cookie creation Mercedes had made with her rudimentary knowledge couldn't have been called attractive even as an earnest attempt at flattery. She couldn't blame Trein for wondering if it was animal dung.

Trein gave them a sniff. When he finally tossed it into his mouth, it was clear he had first needed to gather his courage. But as soon as he tasted it, his doubt vanished and instead turned into surprise.

"What a fascinating taste! It's both sweet yet bitter. It's my first time trying such a thing. No, I actually think I've tasted it somewhere before..."





Trein shoveled the rest of the chocolate into his mouth until nothing was left. He seemed to quite enjoy the treat.

“Um...”

“It’s Mercedes.”

“Ah, thank you. Where did you procure such an item, Mercedes?”

“I made them myself. I couldn’t find a good high-calorie emergency ration in stores.”

“You made them yourself?! They’re excellent! I would love to learn how they’re made...for a price, of course. I’ll give you a royalty of fifty percent for each item sold, and...”

“I like the sound of that. But first, we need to get out of here.”

How typical of a merchant. Even in a place like this, his eyes lit up seeing a money tree before him. Still, monsters could show up at any time inside the dungeons, so it would be best if they waited until they had returned to the surface to chat. After relaying as much, Mercedes lent Trein a shoulder, and the two headed outside.

## Chapter 9: Business

The day after Mercedes rescued Trein, she was led into the reception room at Trein Industries's headquarters. Benkei stood in attendance behind her, his defenses an iron wall as he warily watched their surroundings. Trein sat before her, and the color of his face looked much better than it had the day before. The ostensible reason for her summons was to allow him to once again thank her, but most likely, his real objective lay somewhere else.

"Let me once again extend my gratitude, Miss Mercedes. It's thanks to you that I was able to walk under the moon once again. I want to repay my debt to you. Is there anything you would like?"

"Anything I'd like? I suppose there is, but it's not something sold in stores."

"I see. What is it?"

"Preservable foods high in calories, nutritionally balanced, and easy to carry. I'd like you to help me make these. What do you think? I believe it should benefit you too."

Now that Mercedes had succeeded in creating chocolate, she set her sights on inventing canned goods. All it required was that food be placed inside an airtight container, sanitized, and closed. Putting it that way, it sounded simple, but it had taken humanity a long time to reach a point where that was possible, and unfortunately, this world was not yet there. She didn't want to cause any large disruptions in the market, but long-lasting provisions could benefit many Seekers, including herself.

"Would you give us permission to sell this item?"

"I want ten percent of the sales, and I don't want my name associated with it. I'd like to sell you manufacturing permissions under those conditions. Of course, that goes for the previous item you called me here to discuss today as well."

Encountering Mercedes was undoubtedly serendipitous for Trein. Not only did she save his life, but she also became a money tree. But he wasn't the only

one who had lucked out; encountering Trein was serendipitous for Mercedes as well. It would be difficult for her to mass-produce chocolate on her own, but with a major merchant backing her, that would change. And if she could receive a portion of that chocolate's sales, she'd have absolutely no room for complaints.

"You can turn me down. If you do, I don't mind receiving cash as my repayment."

"And you'll sell the manufacturing method to another company, yes?"

"I see we've reached an understanding." This was only a half-truth. If she could, she already would have. She may have been related to Lord Bernhard, the ruler of this land, but she was just the daughter of a concubine. It was unclear whether he even acknowledged their existence. Mercedes had no authority, and if a girl like her showed up at a merchant's door promising a get-rich-quick scheme, she'd just be turned away.

Trein pondered for a moment before making his decision. "Sure. I'm a businessman myself. I accept your conditions."

"Then it's a deal. In that case..." Mercedes took a piece of parchment out of her breast pocket. It described the drawbacks of violating their contract alongside some other things, all in intricate detail, but only two lines were particularly important: "If any conditions of this contract are broken, all rights of the product shall be relinquished to the other party" and "Once rights are ceded, the right to make the same product shall be void."

"If you agree to these terms, I'd like you to sign with your blood. I will agree to the same conditions and sign as well."

"You'd like to make a blood pact?"

Blood pacts were a part of vampire culture. They had no magical enforcing powers, but vampires who broke a promise signed in blood were scorned by the rest of their race. Those contracts were only broken with the resignation that you'd have to live the rest of your life facing constant criticism. To vampires, someone who broke a blood pact was more immoral than those who had killed, and while it perhaps went without saying, even though they were not magically binding, they were *legally* binding. Thus, such blood pacts were mostly used in

agreements between merchants or between cities. However, since it was legally binding for both parties, it wasn't something that could be abused.

"Sure. There's nothing odd about these conditions from what I can tell." Trein bit his own finger and stamped his blood onto the paper. Once Mercedes had watched him finish, she did the same, completing the binding contract between them. Of course, there wasn't just a single copy; both parties had to keep one for themselves, and so, they had to make the blood pact twice.

"Well then, would you be able to instruct me now?"

"Sure. First, I'll teach you about this black thing. It's called chocolate, and..."

Mercedes explained the processes for making chocolate and canned goods. She also instructed him on the structure and mechanisms of the necessary devices, as well as what would be needed to build them. She might have given him more information than necessary, but it was good for getting him indebted to her. Even more importantly, she didn't think her test creation could be sold as it currently was. Profits would ultimately make their way back to her, so there was no need to be stingy with what she was sharing.

The two spent the whole day talking, chatting until the sun had risen.

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Once the sun had set, Mercedes headed to the Seekers' Guild. She didn't purchase any new weapons, but now that she had Benkei to carry her belongings, she bought a large backpack. Inside was a rope, spare candles, a change of clothes, a compass, drinking water, parchment, chocolate, a pickaxe, and some other things. Of course, it was his job to carry all that.

Walking through town with Benkei at her side attracted a lot of curious stares, but no one approached her. When she entered the guild, the same receptionist as always greeted her with his characteristic off-putting smile.

"My! Welcome, hun. I was waiting for you."

"Did something happen?"

"Yup. You've been upgraded to E rank. Congratulations."

Somehow, she had increased her rank just by making two maps. Well,

considering she had captured monsters for that pet shop and retrieved water samples as well, she had completed four jobs in total. She should be able to take on some more profitable jobs from here on out, so she decided to take advantage of this and accept two jobs to gather materials from monsters.

[Harvest No-Good Jelly Slimes]

Client: Leila Sweets

Reward: 20,000~ Yerks

Time Limit: Two Weeks

Details: Capture no-good jelly slimes or harvest their parts from the dungeons. The reward will increase depending on how much you bring back.

Description: Gray, humanoid slime monsters

[Steal Swords from Gerippe Fechters]

Client: Manufacturers' Guild

Reward: 10,000~ Yerks

Time Limit: Three Weeks

Details: We would like you to steal swords from gerippe fechters. We will purchase them at 10,000 yerks per sword.

Description: Skeletons with fangs and equipped with swords and shields

Mercedes decided to take on those two jobs. She thought there was a chance that gerippe fechters—which meant “skeleton swordsmen”—were the monsters she had stolen her own sword from. Based on the details written below the job, that seemed likely. She'd keep the one she had now for herself and just bring several of the same back.

She didn't quite know what to make of the no-good jelly slimes. The only information she had was that they were gray, humanoid slime monsters. Times like these really made her miss photographs.

*An empty box, a piece of plastic, an iron, black drawing paper, and copy art paper... Nope, I won't be able to do it. The rest are feasible, but there's nothing I can use to replace the copy art paper. I won't be able to make one myself.*

Mercedes recalled the instructions on how to make a simple camera—the kind that kids would create for independent research projects—but one of the materials was something she couldn't get her hands on, so she gave up on the idea. Back in modern Japan, there would have been tons of replacements at any hardware store. Now, the absence of that convenience hit her like a ton of bricks.

Copy art paper was a type of photosensitive paper sold in Japan, but even if she was able to craft photosensitive paper here, she'd need photographic emulsion, and to make that, she'd need silver halide and gelatin. All of that was simply too much for her to handle by herself. In her past life, her occupation hadn't been related to manufacturing anyways. She was just a novice with the scant knowledge she had picked up from researching it as a hobby. She could only make the kinds of things you'd see sold as "Make it Yourself!" kits.

Mercedes gave up on making a camera and immediately headed back to Stark Dungeon. This time, though, she had a bit of difficulty with transportation. Thus far, she had traveled on her own, so she'd been able to use magic to arrive at her destination in little time, but now, she had Benkei with her. If she used the full extent of her flying magic, Benkei would be left behind. She had to find a new way to commute.

Incidentally, when she had returned from the dungeons alongside Trein, they traveled via a carriage he had waiting outside the cave. Because of this, she had been a bit late to realize this problem.

"I suppose there's no helping it. It's not the most flattering look, but, well..."

Mercedes considered casting magic on both Benkei and herself, but there was an even easier answer to her problems. First, she beckoned him toward her with her hand. Then, she lifted him into the air.

"Um...master?"

Mercedes cast *befreien* on the confused Benkei and tossed him into the air. At the same time, she jumped up. When she caught up to him, she climbed on his back. The image of them flying through the air like this was quite surreal, but with this method, she could cast magic on him alone and travel. Once they had solved their transportation issue, they arrived at Stark Dungeon and

immediately entered.

Now, Benkei carried Mercedes's lantern and backpack. She was glad that the only thing she had to hold this time was her sword. From here on out, she'd have to visit many dungeons as a Seeker, but for the time being, she wanted to use Stark Dungeon as a stepping stone to help her get there. She wanted to capture another monster or two as a companion, as well as earn some money so she'd be able to buy a powerful weapon.

Her current goal was to gain independence from her father and care for her mother and their old maid. For that, she knew she needed to build a sturdy foundation. Being a Seeker meant risking your life, but she had no intention of taking that gamble whenever she entered a dungeon. It was best to build a proper foundation so she'd be able to make money without risk.

"Benkei, if I were to make a monster in this dungeon my ally, what would be best?"

"Hmm. What about the schwarz wolfangs that appear on the twelfth floor and lower?"

"What kind of monsters are they?"

"They are wolf monsters that are one and a half meters tall and both the biggest and strongest type of wolfang that appear in this dungeon. They have no supernatural powers, but their base power and speed rival that of silbern wolfangs, which are thought to be the strongest of the species. They are a bit fussy, but they show absolute loyalty and are willing to risk their lives for whoever they recognize as their master. If you can tame one, it will surely be extremely helpful to you. They may also be used as mounts."

"That doesn't sound half bad. If we find one, let's capture it."

Based on Benkei's description, she concluded it was a huge wolf, which sounded perfect. Not only was it very fantasy-esque, she'd be able to snuggle it like a pet once it got used to her.

"Meow."

Just as she was thinking about the big doggy she'd get to meet later, she encountered a huge kitty cat. It was about the size of a tiger, but it



unmistakably resembled a house cat. The effect was odd; it was like a tabby cat had been enlarged to the size of a big cat species.

Mercedes took out the sticks she had once used in place of a torch and waved them in front of the cat to draw its attention. Once its eyes were locked on, she threw them. The cat chased after them, leaving Mercedes and Benkei behind.

In her past life, there was a saying that one would “even borrow a cat’s paws” if they were extremely busy, but luckily, Mercedes could manage on her own.

## Chapter 10: Her Second Comrade

A skeleton wielding a sword appeared before them. It was a gerippe fechter, the same monster Mercedes had stolen her own sword from, but not a second later, Benkei tore it in two with one swoop of his own blade. What transpired couldn't even be called a battle.

Mercedes wasn't sure if Benkei was strong or the gerippe fechter was weak. In any case, she was certain he would be excellent help to her here in the upper floors. This was the fifth monster he had slain on sight, meaning she hadn't had to fight at all. They were progressing through the dungeons quickly and smoothly.

She retrieved the sword the skeleton monster had dropped before turning her eyes to its shield. "Benkei. You should take the shield. It's a waste to keep a sword in all six of your arms. You need to equip a wider variety of weapons. You'll be able to do more that way."

"Hmm... I see."

Having six arms was quite advantageous in a fight. Still, equipping swords in each one limited Benkei's abilities. Mercedes thought that if he had a lance, a shield, a bow, or whatever else, he'd be able to broaden his fighting capabilities.

He didn't seem too dead set on having swords either, as he immediately dropped one and replaced it with a shield. The sword he discarded was higher quality than those the gerippe fechtters carried, so Mercedes decided to switch out her sword for the one Benkei had just dropped. Now, she could just turn that one in too. Selling your old weapons as soon as you got stronger ones was just how fantasy worlds operated.

The two easily made their way down to the tenth floor without any tough fights. Most monsters couldn't hold a candle to Benkei and perished immediately, while the ones who could resist a single blow were quickly wiped out by a follow-up attack from Mercedes.

When they arrived at the eleventh floor, they encountered their other objective: the gray jelly monster. It perfectly matched the description Mercedes had been given, but seeing a human-shaped mass of gray slime was quite odd in person. A sphere was situated in its chest, and it was impossible not to notice.

“Jiggle jiggle. I’m a no-good jelly slime.”

“Then I better get rid of you.” Mercedes sliced the slime monster as soon as it appeared. The jelly tried to stick itself back together, but as soon as she cut through the sphere in its chest, it all slumped to the ground and the monster was still.

“How did you know the core was my weakness...?”

“It’s how monsters like you always work, but I thought slimes weren’t supposed to talk.” It was an odd question considering how obvious the monster made it seem.

Mercedes shoved the slime into a bag she had brought with her. Surprisingly, it felt nice to the touch and didn’t stick to her hands. The client for this job had been a sweets shop, but she couldn’t imagine there was any way people were eating this stuff.

“Well then, our jobs are done. But since we’re already here, we’re heading to the twelfth floor.”

“To capture a schwarz wofang, I presume?”

“Yup. After that, we leave.”

Once they had reached the tenth floor, the monsters got stronger. Now, they sporadically encountered some who could withstand one of Benkei’s attacks. Even so, they weren’t hard to beat; Benkei alone would have been able to take them out easily.

After almost no effort, they reached the twelfth floor and began to search for the wolf they were after. They wandered around for a short while and encountered a wolfman, but unfortunately, it wasn’t the kind they needed.

“It’s a werewolf rot, a wolfman as fierce as flames that can spit fire. Be careful. They are quite strong.”

“Fire? That’s perfect. I can’t use that affinity. Let’s capture this one as well.”

The ferocious werewolf before them was 190 centimeters tall. The height difference between it and Mercedes was comparable to a man and a child, but she wasn’t afraid. With a smirk, she cracked her fingers and took a step forward.

But then, they sensed something rushing toward them from deeper in the dungeon. They made an immediate retreat, but the werewolf rot couldn’t react in time. The new presence slammed into it, knocking off its top half as blood spurted into the air. Mercedes and Benkei looked behind them to find a large, black wolf biting off the wolfman’s head.

“That’s the one, right?”

“Without a doubt.”

Mercedes grinned. Now that her target had brought itself to her, she wouldn’t have to spend time looking for it. It was a tad unfortunate that she wouldn’t be able to capture the werewolf rot, but she could make up for that by ensuring she caught this one.

The wofang bared its fangs and snarled, glaring at her.



She took a step forward, and the monster lunged toward her like a black gust of wind. She stuck her hand forward in response, but the wolfang jumped right over her. At the same time, a shock traveled down her shoulder. Her clothing had been torn, and while one of her shoulders was now bare, she remained calm.

“This one’s quick.”

The small tear in her shoulder healed in an instant as Mercedes turned back to face the wolfang. Benkei tried to step forward, but she put out her hand to stop him. She needed to establish a clear hierarchy; if someone else bested it, the wolf wouldn’t accept her as its master.

As soon as Mercedes stepped forward, the wolfang sprung at her. Her skin was torn once again, and as the wound healed, she turned behind her. However, the black gust of wind was still going. It attacked her from all sides, sinking its claws into her arms, shoulders, sides, and legs. However, she didn’t even groan. She watched the wolfang with cold, emotionless eyes and let it rip into her. All she did was ensure it couldn’t damage her vitals.

Mercedes remained practically unharmed. Her wounds healed as soon as she suffered them, and the wolfang’s attacks gradually slowed. In the beginning, she had underestimated her opponent, allowing it to land some blows on her, but now that she had learned to block those attacks, the wolfang could barely land a single hit.

This tit for tat lasted around a minute. Eventually, Mercedes lowered her eyes and muttered, “All right. Now I’m used to it,” right before the wolfang came in for its fourteenth attack. This time, she decided to forgo any sort of defense and instead dodged the wolfang’s fangs. She lured it to stand right before her chest, then pet it on its nose, an area indefensible for a wolf.

The wolfang froze in shock, but Mercedes didn’t attack. Grabbing or tapping a dog on the nose—a “nose tap” or “nose grab”—was a way of communicating to a dog that you were above it and able to defend it. Female dogs would do it to their pups, and when used correctly, it could be very effective in dog training. However, forced and excessive nose taps instead instilled fear; it was quite common for dogs to reject owners who overutilized these or alpha rolls. That

fear could develop into biting and intimidation behavior.

Of course, Mercedes could have also tamed the wolfang through that method, but she was against it. Under ideal circumstances, training made clear the power dynamics between dog and owner without spooking it. Thus, getting a dog accustomed to touch and breaking down its defenses was effective.

Mercedes repeated the same action, and eventually, the wolfang grew docile. It realized that not only was she much stronger but that she wasn't hostile, and with that, the wolfang's own hostility dissipated. Now, she petted it with glee.

"All right. Let's return to the surface. I need to train him."

Now that the black wolf had been tamed, it was time to bring it home.

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After returning with the schwarz wolfang, Mercedes decided to begin by gaining its trust. Once a hierarchy was established, that was the next step; it was dog training 101.

Addressing the wolfang was hard without a name, so she decided to call him Kuro. At first, she considered the name Schwarz, but given that its species was known as schwarz wolfangs, she realized doing so would be like naming a Homo sapien "Sapien" and thought better of it. Thus, she made little change to her original idea and named the wolfang Kuro; both just meant "black," but honestly, she felt this option sounded cuter.

Incidentally, both Mercedes's mother and the maid readily accepted Benkei and Kuro, which came as a surprise to her. She had the two wait in her own room during the day to avoid scaring her other housemates, but her mother told her to bring the two with her to dinner and provided them with meals as if they were any other member of the family. She was a brave lady.

At the same time, Trein Industries had already begun selling chocolate and canned goods, which had taken the world by storm. Chocolate flew off the shelves not as emergency rations, but as sweet treats. The canned goods were selling perfectly fine as well, but nothing compared to the success of chocolate. Still, they had garnered attention as a portable provision with a long shelf life. More and more sold each day, and they'd certainly see their heyday in the near

future. Mercedes was looking forward to a big payday.

If all went well, she might even be able to buy a manor more extravagant than the one they lived in now. Bringing her mother and maid away from the city and starting a new life somewhere else was always an option. She had never met her father, but she highly doubted he was an upstanding man. It was a depressing thing to waste your life for someone like him, but luckily, her mother still maintained her youthful beauty, so it would be possible for her to start a new life.

If Mercedes could get the two of them out of the city, her original goal—escaping poverty—would be realized. She'd be able to work toward a new one. She had vowed to not let her life end in bitterness and always walk forward, to live a life she wouldn't regret and die laughing. Even so, she didn't have a concrete idea of what she wanted to do; she didn't even have a vision of what it would look like once she'd reached that goal. Instead, she simply had a vague wish to leave some proof of her existence behind. She had too much on her plate escaping her current circumstances to consider where she would go and how she'd get there.

Yes, she wanted to go *somewhere*, but even she didn't know where that was. Or rather, she didn't know if such a place even existed. Still, she wanted to keep moving forward. Even if the path before her was shrouded in darkness, she wasn't going to give up partway and die with regrets.

*My last life was a boring one. I never even got to see the moon wax in full.*

Mercedes was separate from the person of her past life; she had simply inherited their memories. That was clear to her, and it was exactly why she vowed to avoid walking down the same path that person once did. She didn't want to die the same way. She didn't want to have regrets.

So, she'd continue forward. She'd forge a path of her own that was different from the one her past self once walked, even if she didn't know where it would lead.

*Once I get mother and Nan out of our current predicament, next on the agenda is finding a goal. I can finally look for a reason to live and a path to walk down.*



Even if she wanted to dash ahead at full speed, she couldn't if there was no road before her. First, she needed to find a road she could sprint down and laugh at the finish line.

However, things didn't go so smoothly. Mercedes had no idea that the day after she made this resolution, her siblings in similar situations would approach her, nor did she know the terrible things it would bring her way.

## Chapter 11: Siblings

Mercedes currently had plenty of chocolate and canned goods on hand, which apparently had been offered to her by Trein Industries. They were a token of appreciation to the inventor and had accordingly been free. Now, she had exactly what she wanted without having to spend a penny.

In any case, dungeoneering had gotten a whole lot easier. With Kuro, the new member of their party, they had garnered the strength to venture into the dungeon's depths. For now, Mercedes set her sights on the floor that Trein's guards had made it to. But of course, she would turn back the moment she sensed trouble.

Just as Mercedes had put together this plan and was ready to head out, she encountered a group of unfamiliar kids standing outside her house, two boys and two girls. Based on appearances, they ranged in age from under ten to late teens. The most eye-catching of the group was so huge he towered over Mercedes and seemed to be in his college years. The second largest of them appeared to be of middle-school age, while both girls seemed to be ten years old or younger. But since the age of a vampire couldn't be deduced accurately based on appearances alone, she couldn't truly be sure.

"You're Mercedes Grunewald, yeah?"

"Who are you?"

"People under the same circumstances as you, if you get my drift. We're Grunewalds."

The boy who seemed to be middle school aged revealed their identities. He seemed to be the group's leader, and he had short, crimson hair and a light in his eyes as sharp as a beast's.

"So you're the children of concubines."

"Exactly. We're your siblings."

Mercedes and her mother could be abandoned by Bernhard Grunewald at

any time, and based on the dilapidated state of their manor, her mother's position in the harem was quite low. But that didn't mean the other concubines were treated better. In gathering to tell Mercedes that they were under the same circumstances as her, they were revealing the precariousness of their own situations as well.

"The name's Boris Grunewald. I'm fourteen, the oldest of this group."

Apparently, the first boy who had spoken was the eldest. He did look to be about as old as he stated, meaning he had yet to reach his perpetual age. And if he was the oldest, it was safe to assume he *was* the leader.

The next to speak was the tall, most conspicuous member of the group. "Gottfried Grunewald. Thirteen."

Mercedes thought to herself, *Isn't he a bit too grown?* but she didn't say it out loud. True, a vampire's age couldn't be judged based on appearances alone, but this guy was a mystery for the opposite reason. No matter how you looked at him, he had to be seventeen or eighteen. Hell, she would have believed it if he said he was twenty.

"I'm Monika Grunewald, and I am nine." She was the most kempt of the group and had blonde ringlets that suited her face well. Based on her attire, her mother must have had quite a high position in the harem. Case in point, there was a deprecating tint in her eyes whenever she watched Mercedes.

"I'm Margaret Grunewald, and I'm nine too." The last of the group to name herself was a sweet-looking young girl who was blonde like the other. She was quite timid and clearly lacked confidence. Quite pitifully, her mother seemed to have a position in the harem similarly low to that of Mercedes's.



After the four had introduced themselves, Mercedes had no choice but to present her name as well. “It seems like you’re already well aware, but I’m Mercedes Grunewald, ten years old. What brings you all here?”

This was definitely not just an invitation to be friends because of their similar positions. Mercedes tried to keep the edge out of her voice, but she made sure to keep her distance with a cold tone.

“A month from now, there’s going to be a festival to celebrate Felix Grunewald’s fifteenth birthday. He’s the son of Lord Bernhard’s legal wife.”

“I see. Doesn’t sound like it has anything to do with me.”

“Maybe that *was* true, but not anymore. Felix apparently spouted something about how sad it was that his own siblings couldn’t come to this festival, and now he’s talking about summoning us all there and holding a test of strength between us.”

“Right. So we’ll just be there to make him look better.”

“You’re a sharp one, I see. Exactly. He wants to beat us to a pulp in public to prove he’s the rightful heir to the Grunewald name. I’m sure he’s also trying to make clear how powerless we are against him to crush any dreams we might have about taking his place. ‘I’m the heir. You all have no chance!’ That kinda thing. He’s slimy, don’t you think?”

It was a typical family power struggle. When there are multiple viable heirs, it’s hard to avoid conflict over who will come out on top. If things continued as they were, Felix—the eldest and born to Lord Bernhard’s legal wife—would become heir. But that wasn’t guaranteed, as it was always possible a child of a concubine might harbor ambitions to kick him to the curb. This must have been on Felix’s mind.

So, what was the best course of action in such situations? First would be the family head naming an heir, which would lead to the least amount of fuss. But based on Felix’s actions, it was safe to assume that Lord Bernhard had yet to make such a declaration. The next best thing would be all other possible heirs dying, as Felix’s chances would rise to nearly one hundred percent. However, it was he himself who needed to be most cautious of such a situation, being the

avored heir. The last option would be to prove his superiority in a public forum, gaining the support of the masses. At the same time, he'd also be proving to the other candidates that they didn't stand a chance.

Having reached this conclusion, Mercedes couldn't help but grin. *Huh... He's really thinking this through. The legal wife's son has his eyes on the prize. He's chosen an incredibly respectable method to cement his position as heir.*

Boris spoke of Felix as if he were a villain, but that wasn't true at all. Out of all his options, he had picked a quite honest method to make his case. He was clearly a man of upright character considering he hadn't chosen assassination, spreading baseless ill-natured rumors, or executing them without trial as his method of choice.

The real problem was Boris and his crew. What did these four—with Mercedes, five—plan to do? Even if they succeeded in removing Felix from the running, the heir pie could only be split into one slice. Friends would quickly become foes as the five vied for the seat themselves.

Well, whatever. Mercedes could save the rest of her thinking until after she heard them out. Maybe they had a plan up their sleeves.

"But this is our chance! If *we're* the ones to defeat him in public, I could become heir."

*Hey, aren't you being too honest?* Again, Mercedes kept these thoughts to herself. Still, he had clearly said, "*I* could become heir." Not *we*, *I*. He had no plans of splitting the pie in the first place. Though considering that pie was impossible to split, there was some sense to that.

"This guy's an elite, though. He's been educated by the best at the main estate. We won't be able to win playing fair."

"So, what's the plan? Maybe we could take him five to one if he summoned us all up at once, but logically, he'll be calling us up one at a time, and I doubt beating him through numbers alone will garner us any praise."

"I know that. But there's a way forward for us. First, we have him fight Gottfried to tire him out. That blockhead is nothing but a tank, so it'll be tough to take him out. Then, I beat Felix...but there's something I want the rest of you

to do while I'm at it." Boris turned to Margaret as he spoke. On cue, she timidly opened her hands to reveal something.

*A blowgun. They've thought up something classic, I see.* Perhaps it was just the limits of superficial children's thinking. Now they just seemed silly, so much so that Mercedes had to stifle her laughter. But no matter their method, leaving the blowgun to such a young girl was unacceptable.

"You're asking us to shield her while she uses that?"

"You really are a sharp one, huh? Of course, this'll help you out too. If I become heir, I'll treat your family better."

That was the moment Mercedes formed her opinion on Boris. He was a weakling—no, a weakling *among* weaklings who refused to get his hands dirty himself. He wasn't fit to become a feudal lord. Even if all went well, his eventual failure was inevitable. That was just the character he was, so she concluded that it would be better to let this unknown Felix stay as heir than let Boris take his place.

"Unfortunately, we're getting by just fine. You all can do whatever you want."

Mercedes tried to leave, as she had lost all interest, but Boris must have not appreciated her attitude. He blocked her path and forced her up against a nearby tree, placing his arm next to her head in a *kabe-don*—or rather, *tree-don*—fashion.

"I just don't get you. Why refuse? I told you I'd treat you well if I become heir. Obey me. I won't take no for an answer."

"No." The word came out smoothly like butter. She was far from a fan of narcissists who thought that their word was law. Boris furiously punched the tree threateningly, and its large frame swayed. He left a mark, but she had to seriously doubt he was trying to intimidate her with a weak punch like that.

"Is that it?"

"Huh?"

"You've got a long way to go. Let me show you how it's done."

Without so much as a change of expression, Mercedes grabbed Boris by the

collar and switched their positions. Then, she thrust her fist into the tree, breaking it from its base with a thunderous crack. Boris sank to the ground lifelessly, and the rest of the siblings watched with faces as white as sheets, except for Monika, who was blushing for some reason.

Still, Mercedes knew she had taken things too far. There'd been no need to completely knock the tree over. She'd just have to retrieve it later and use it as firewood and construction material.

In any case, she looked down on Boris, who was still collapsed on the floor, and spoke as if she were addressing a child. "That's how you do it."

He was silent and completely flabbergasted, and she simply turned her back and walked away. The rest of her siblings were clearly awestruck by her power and retreated as she proudly made her way over to where Benkei and Kuro were waiting.

Mercedes had wasted her time. Still, she met eyes with the young, timid girl.

"Come here."

"Huh?"

It was obvious she'd be used for all sorts of terrible things if she was left here with the others. She seemed weak-willed, and given her poor circumstances, Boris must have taken special notice of her as someone he could use as a pawn. Mercedes was no saint, but she wasn't a devil who could leave her sister here knowing what ill fate would await her. Margaret couldn't refuse. Mercedes took her with her, and this time, she set off for good.



## Chapter 12: Twisted Traditions

“Don’t associate with that crowd. I don’t know about the other two, but the ‘leader’ is irredeemably worthless. He’s the type of guy who always fails.”

Mercedes talked to Margaret as they walked toward the city. Being half sisters, they resembled each other...except not in the slightest. Their hair was different colors, and their facial features differed as well. While they were both undeniably beautiful, Mercedes had a resting scowl that Margaret lacked; while Margaret had the eyes of a gullible kitten, Mercedes had the eyes of a stray cat which had returned to the wild.

At nine and ten, they were quite close in age, and as they had yet to reach their perpetual ages, both their appearances matched the years they had lived. However, Mercedes had a calm to her, unbefitting of her youthful appearance. She didn’t look her age, and the guild had never suspected she had falsified her records. On the other hand, Margaret appeared even younger than she was. It was only natural; they may have started in the same place, but they differed on the inside.

Both had been born to mothers lowly positioned in the harem. Their homes were dilapidated, and they both lived in conditions too standard to be befitting of nobles. But Mercedes had memories of her past life. While she may have started at the bottom, she had the foundation to overcome it. That wasn’t true for Margaret, though, and perhaps it was impossible to avoid growing up to be so timid when thrust into such poor circumstances without the means to fight them.

“But he said he’d make things better for us... If he did, I’d be able to let my mommy eat good food too...”

“So that’s how it is. You usually eat plain rye bread, potatoes, broth, and monster blood too.”

That was the typical meal at Mercedes’s house. Occasionally, they’d get salad made from wild plants as well. But this wasn’t because the two adults were

poor chefs; instead, this was simply all they could afford.

Things had improved since then, though. Once she was old enough, Mercedes began to provide wild plants, mushrooms, river fish, and beasts she hunted on the mountain as well. This created some room in their savings, providing much needed relief. Once she received her stipend from Trein Industries, their household should become rich in an instant. The five years she had spent building a foundation had led to steady progress.

But if she didn't have the wisdom she had, she might have simply languished in her poverty. Although she despised her past life, she couldn't help but be thankful for it whenever she considered this fact.

As they were speaking, Margaret's stomach began to growl. It seemed Mercedes had been right; the girl really wasn't getting enough to eat.

"Take this. It'll fill your stomach." Mercedes took some chocolate out of her pocket and ripped open the wrapper before handing it to Margaret. It was rations meant for herself, but she could spare one bar.

The moment Margaret laid eyes on the chocolate, her eyes opened wide in surprise. "Wow! Is this chocolate? And I can have it? All of it?"

"You know about it?"

"Yeah! Miss Monika said it was an expensive sweet gaining popularity around town that only rich people can afford. She let me have a tiny bit!"

Just how much was that stupid Trein selling it for? Mercedes resisted the temptation to sigh. The quality was even worse than the stuff you could buy for a hundred yen, and yet it was such a luxury item only the rich could afford it? All she had wanted to make was something high in calories, portable with a long shelf life, and easily bought for cheap. What was he trying to accomplish in selling it for so much? Still, she had already sold away the rights, therefore it was Trein's prerogative to sell it for however much he wanted.

But Mercedes had gotten another piece of information as well. If she was correct, Monika was the girl with the ringlets. She had a deprecating look whenever she glanced at Mercedes, but it seemed like she wasn't too bad a person after all.

“Can I really have all of it, though? Isn’t it expensive?”

“Sure you can. I’ve got plenty, thanks to certain reasons.”

As the inventor of the product, Mercedes could purchase it from Trein for cheap. Now that it was on the market, she probably wouldn’t get it for free like he had offered the first time, but she still should be able to get a discount...probably. Well, considering how expensive it was, she’d probably be paying a pretty penny even with a discount.

Margaret bit into the chocolate with a childlike grin and devoured it, enraptured. It seemed like a child’s love for sweets was universal. In her previous life, Mercedes had preferred salty over sweet, but in this body, she found sweets awfully tasty. While she had first created chocolate with the intention of creating a high-calorie, portable food, in retrospect, she couldn’t help but feel that she had just wanted to eat some again.

“By the way...Margaret, you said your name was? Do you have any skills?”

Mercedes had led Margaret away after determining that staying with the others wouldn’t be good for her, but just bringing her back home wouldn’t accomplish anything either, as the others would inevitably try to use her again. Nothing could be solved until Margaret’s poor circumstances improved, which got Mercedes wondering if Margaret had any skills. If the girl could make some money on her own—even just a pittance—Boris wouldn’t be able to lead her astray. He was free to ruin things for himself, but Mercedes couldn’t look the other way if he was trying to take this innocent young girl down with him.

Offering money to Margaret could only come if nothing else worked, as it could lead to Margaret losing her will to stand on her own two feet. Getting Margaret to a place where she could make money herself was clearly the best option.

“Um...I can draw pictures. I don’t have any friends, so I draw pictures on the ground with rocks every day.”

“Pictures, huh? That’s not half bad.”

There was something incredibly tragic about what she had just said, but Mercedes decided not to touch on it. Plus, Mercedes had no similarly aged

friends of her own since she spent her days doing training, training, and more training. She was in the same boat. Due to her distaste for interacting with others, she was a character of severe solitude.

“Draw something on this for me.”

“S-Sure.”

Mercedes took out a pen and some parchment from her pocket and handed them over to Margaret. While it was still called “parchment,” it wasn’t made from sheep or goat hide, but from the monsters that overflowed from dungeons and could be slain with no problem (in fact, it often earned praise). Alive, they caused problems, which was why they needed to be defeated. Their bones were turned into jewelry and armor, their flesh food, and their skin parchment. While monsters were beasts that threatened the Falsch, they were at the same time something they couldn’t live without. Rather than sheepskin parchment, this was monsterskin parchment.

“I’m done!”

Mercedes took the paper from Margaret and gazed at it in wonder. She had drawn Mercedes, and she had recreated her features so well that Mercedes had been able to recognize herself at a single glance. This got her thinking. Once, when she had accepted a job from the guild, she had found herself wishing for a drawing or photograph that easily explained what the monsters looked like. Plus, the guild sought information on the dungeons so much that they would put up mapping jobs themselves. Not to mention, Mercedes read a lot of books about monsters back home, and eventually, she realized that for some reason, all the books in this world lacked illustrations.

“First, we gather information. Let’s head to the guild.”

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“You wanna know why books don’t have pictures, hun? Now that you mention it, it’s not something you really see... I wonder why? Well, I suppose books are something you read, and pictures are images of scenes and people that you look at. It’s a bit strange to compartmentalize it that way, huh? But I think that’s probably the reason. Being able to read books means being able to read letters, so in other words, they’ve got a reputation for being something

only literate bigwigs can read. They probably just think there's no need for pictures. Well, considering I've never written a book, that's all just speculation."

That was the answer Mercedes had received upon asking the receptionist why books didn't have pictures. There wasn't any special reason; it was all simply the fixed idea that pictures were art and letters were learning. Their genres were so different nobody had thought to put them together before. Still, wasn't there a place for illustrations? Back on Earth, the history of illustrations was believed to be almost as old as writing.

"So it's not banned, right?"

"I've never heard of anything like that, hun, but I at least think books with pictures sound like a good idea. Crude drawings would just get in the way, but if you combined them right, even illiterate vampires would be able to read books."

So there wasn't any deep reason forbidding it. If there had been legal or religious pretenses, they would have had to give up, but ideology could be overcome, and Mercedes had no qualms crushing it. Of course, those who read books might protest and artists might complain that art was its own thing, but that was a bridge that had to be crossed when pioneering any new genre. The path forward continued despite the objections of traditionalists.

*Still, I understand why there are no picture books—those weren't invented until the seventeenth century and this world is stuck in the Middle Ages—but why are there no illustrations?*

This world had no tradition of putting both words and images in the same book. For Mercedes, this was fortunate. Not only did it mean they had found a way for Margaret to earn money, but Mercedes wanted monster encyclopedias with illustrations for herself.

However, there was something that didn't seem right. She had no choice but to accept it if it was just this nation's culture, but didn't it naturally make sense to add illustrations to books? Drawing was a method of communication humanity had gained during the Paleolithic Age, and humans may have learned to do so even sooner. Even if books contained letters, it seemed incredibly unnatural not to utilize that other form of communication well. Images could be

the most effective method in relaying abstract concepts that words alone couldn't, and they seemed like an absolute necessity in creating monster encyclopedias.

Something just felt off, like a fishbone caught in the throat. But in tracing the threads of history, idiotic things could often not develop for idiotic reasons. Perhaps such a thing was believable. She forced herself to be satisfied with this answer and took her considerations no further.

## Chapter 13: The Same Monster

Mercedes had wanted to venture into the dungeon's depths, but she changed her plans and decided to focus on the dungeon's higher levels. The reason was obvious: she had to carry baggage around—that being Margaret. In the upper levels, Mercedes, Benkei, and Kuro could protect her from all sides, but that might not work if a monster as fast as Kuro appeared. Thus, they limited themselves to the levels where Mercedes could fight with ease and focused on allowing Margaret to draw the monsters.

"I'll take care of any enemies. Kuro, take Margaret on your back and protect her. Benkei, you guard the rear and stay alert."

"Understood."

"Woof!"

Mercedes took the lead while Benkei held up the rear and Margaret rode Kuro. Their formation was likely enough to prevent any weak monsters from harming Margaret. Mercedes handed the girl a pen and parchment and commanded her to sketch any of the monsters that appeared.

They wandered the first floor for a while, and the first monster they encountered was a giant mole, the same monster Mercedes had first fought.

"This is the same place it appeared last time."

Mercedes hopped into the air and kicked the mole's neck in, fatally snapping its spinal cord. Margaret was momentarily dumbfounded, but she eventually remembered her task and began to record the mole's form.

Mercedes decided to examine the mole's body with crossed arms as she waited. It may have been average size for this type of monster, and it may have just been a coincidence, but it had a scar over its left eye. Mercedes remembered seeing the exact same wound on the mole she had defeated. Did this species always have the same scar?

"Benkei. Do monsters generate infinitely?"

Mercedes had some doubts. So many monsters were hunted each day, but the need to hunt them never decreased. Seekers hunted dangerous monsters for their livelihoods, for parchment materials, for pelts, for bones to make into accessories, for meat to eat... Monsters were hunted to no end.

This would normally lead to extinction. Even on Earth, there were countless examples of species which had gone extinct due to overhunting. So, why didn't hunting so many monsters interrupt the natural balance? How had their ecosystem survived?

Hunting monsters wasn't a novel profession; it had existed in the distant past—for a few centuries, at least. Under normal circumstances, they'd go extinct. At least, some species would. Back on Earth, there were many myopic and idiotic poachers who brought species so close to extinction that humans had no choice but to protect them. But in this world, hunting monsters was publicly sanctioned and even a paid job. It was odd that no monsters had gone extinct. This wasn't a JRPG where monsters would endlessly spawn on the field map. Stop and think about it, and anybody would realize something was strange here.

"I believe it is so. Monsters generate without end."

"And it's not because they're highly fertile, is it? It's extremely unlikely that there would be another mole with the exact same scar as before. This isn't a mole that just *happens* to resemble the one I defeated...it's *the exact same mole*."

"I believe you are correct. I was entrusted with protecting the door in this dungeon's depths. But it is not because someone gave me such a role; I have simply known it was the duty assigned to me ever since I gained consciousness. I have seen the door open many times, and from the other side come monsters that spread through the dungeons. I am quite certain they replace the ones that have been slain."

"And what else was behind the door?"

"There is a narrow passage that leads to another door. Even I do not know what lies beyond it."

Mercedes took a moment to contemplate Benkei's words. Just as she had



thought, monsters didn't come into this world via biological reproduction, and monsters exactly like the ones before came into this world as if they had simply been copied. The door Benkei guarded probably led to the truth behind this secret. However, there were two layers of doors, and even the gatekeeper himself didn't know what was contained beyond them. Additionally, monsters most likely didn't remember their births, and if they did, Benkei would know what the doors concealed.

"I see. But I took you, the monster guarding the door, away. Does that mean there's another you guarding the door now?"

"Yes. I believe it is a version of me from before I met you."

"Then there's a version of Kuro before we met on the twelfth floor... No, I suppose it's just a nameless schwarz wolfgang."

"I believe that is so."

Mercedes's head was starting to hurt. Just what were dungeons? There was something quite unnatural about their existence. They would appear randomly, spawn monsters, and occasionally send those monsters to the outside world as if begging the people there to not forget about them. Or was this just the natural state of this world? Did no one find it strange? Was Mercedes the odd one out for finding this system peculiar?

"I'm done, big sister!"

"Good. Show me."

At least for now, she didn't have evidence for any further explanation. Thinking about the truth of the dungeons didn't get her any closer to finding it; it only made the situation more unsettling. Thus, she turned off her thoughts and focused her attention on Margaret's drawing.

"It's really good. I thought it was a photo for a moment."

"A photo?"

"It just means you did a good job."

Mercedes patted Margaret's head as a show of praise, but once she gave it a bit more thought, she realized they weren't far apart in age. She couldn't help

but feel like she was dealing with a kid much younger than herself, but considering how happy Margaret looked, she could let that slide.

“All right. On to the next one.”

Afterward, Mercedes defeated a variety of monsters and had Margaret draw them. After a few trips into the dungeon, she had a general sense of what monsters appeared on what floor.

Finally, the group made their way to floor eleven, which was the limit to where Mercedes thought she could handle the monsters with ease. If she ventured any farther, she would be putting Margaret at risk. In other words, once they recorded all the monsters here, they’d be done for the day.

“Jiggle jiggle. I’m a no-good jelly slime.”

“Oh, I had forgotten about you, guy. Can I ask you something? Is this the first time we’ve met?”

“Jiggle jiggle. I haven’t seen you before.”

“I see. Thanks.” After asking her question, she ripped out the jelly slime’s core and squashed it in her hands. So, while they had the same body, they didn’t share memories. It seemed that the same monster wasn’t just being revived; instead, it was more like it was being copied.

“Um, big sister?”

“Hm? Oh, sorry. I wasn’t thinking. There’s nothing left now.” Mercedes killed the monster in an instant like she had been doing, but she realized this had been a mistake. With the core now smashed, the jelly slime’s body had been reduced to a puddle on the floor. “There’s nothing we can do about it. Use your memories for this one. This monster’s just a core floating in some jelly.”

“Okay.”

With that out of the way, the group withdrew from the dungeon. They weren’t about to embark on any risky adventures with Margaret in tow. Once they returned to the surface, Mercedes wrote some captions on the images Margaret had drawn with Benkei helping her fill in the gaps. They had completed a proper monsterpedia, and Mercedes headed straight to the

Seekers' Guild to sell it.

"I want to sell these papers filled with information on monsters. How much do you want for it?"

"Hm? Let me see there, hun. Hmm... Hmhm... This is good. With the illustrations, you can tell exactly what monster's being talked about at a glance. Stark Dungeon's a high-level dungeon with powerful monsters. This will really come in handy, especially the information on monsters from the lower floors."

"It's high-level?"

The receptionist looked over the papers with glee, but his words had come as a bit of a shock to Mercedes, who had always considered Stark Dungeon to be full of weak monsters meant for beginners. Not that anyone had told her that, of course, but she had naturally come to that conclusion considering it was near town and even F rank Seekers were allowed to venture into it. However, when she took another look at the board, she realized the request to retrieve water from the dungeon's spring was now a C rank job even though it had been F rank just a few days prior.

"Hey, isn't the difficulty of the job different from when I took it?"

"Oh, you mean that? Sorry, hun! The dungeon had just appeared, so we hadn't properly investigated it yet. Management made a mistake on that one. Once we got more intel, we realized it was more dangerous than we had assumed. As a result, we ended up losing a whole team of B rank Seekers. After that news, we had to quickly readjust the difficulty."

Mercedes fell silent.

"But I really do feel bad, hun! Even if the difficulty of a job changes after the fact, there's no increasing or decreasing a reward we've already paid out. You wouldn't want to have to return your money if a job ended up being worth less, right? It's written right in the contract. It ended up working against you a bit, but it also means we'll be updating your rank. You've climbed straight to C rank, hun!"

Mercedes let the receptionist's words go in one ear and right out the other as she turned to Benkei and Kuro. Could they actually be *strong*? Until now, she

had simply considered them the strongest monsters in a weak dungeon, but now, she realized they were just regular strong monsters.

“Oh, that’s right! We’ll buy this intel from you for eight hundred thousand yerks.”

The price was much higher than Mercedes had been expecting. She once again realized that the comment about Stark Dungeon being risky hadn’t been said in jest.

## Chapter 14: Enhanced Strength

After leaving the guild, Mercedes took half of the reward and handed the rest to Margaret. Each of them had received four hundred thousand yerks, about what an adult working a decent paying, low-risk job would make in four months. Of course, there weren't office jobs in this world, so she wasn't certain what would constitute an average income.

"Th-Thank you. Can I really have all this?"

"Of course. It's your due reward for a job well done."

With the money Margaret had earned, she'd be able to live without struggle for a while and buy some delicious food for her mother. But on the other hand, that would be it. In a few months' time, she'd be back where she started. Therefore, Mercedes had no intention of ending things here; this was just money to help Margaret survive for the time being.

"First, let's buy some food. You wanted to treat your mother to something tasty, right?"

"Yup!"

Mercedes led Margaret to a large general store, where they—or rather, just Margaret—bought their goods and paid for them. Mercedes simply watched, generally leaving everything up to the younger girl, save a few words whenever she tried to buy something odd. She'd answer any questions Margaret asked, but otherwise, she made no suggestions on what the girl should or shouldn't purchase. Margaret seemed to understand this, and she strove to choose the best groceries as best as she could.

Once that was done, Mercedes had Margaret buy a single book titled, *How to Write and Read: A Simple Guide for Monkeys* with an author listed as "Gorilla." It was practically begging to be made fun of, but while the title was terrible, it described how to read and write in detail. Mercedes had previously assumed that illustrations didn't exist in the books of this world, but this one may just

have been the only exception. There were no pictures, but it was nonetheless filled with simple diagrams which could be considered “illustrations” in at least one sense of the word. Mercedes had the same book in her house and had used it to learn to read herself. If the chance arose, she’d love to meet the author.

“You should be able to learn to read and write with this. Then, you could become a scribe. That’s a stable job that doesn’t involve risking your life like Seekers, Landsknechts, or soldiers do.”

The job Mercedes recommended to Margaret was that of a scribe. They wrote documents, love letters, and petitions for others, and given the low literacy rate in this world, it could be quite profitable. Everybody had been literate in modern-day Japan, but in societies where that wasn’t the case, it was essential to have people who could write in others’ steads. Most scribes set up stands in town, but others stayed at a central location and had middlemen bring work to them. An obviously young girl like Margaret setting up a stand and loitering around town would create an easy target for thugs, so Mercedes planned to have her use the latter method. If things went well, Margaret would be able to earn consistent money for herself and survive even should their father abandon her.

“I’ll visit occasionally to teach you, but I won’t always be available. Start with what you can manage by yourself. Can you do that?”

“Y-Yes! I’ll do my best.”

“That’s the answer I wanted to hear.”

After that, Mercedes took Margaret back home before heading back herself. Just as she had originally declared, she hadn’t stepped in to help Margaret. First, the girl needed to learn to do things on her own. Then, once Mercedes determined how quick she learned, they’d build a plan from there. Immediately jumping in to help would only hinder Margaret’s growth, which was why she needed Margaret to stand on her own two feet. However harsh it sounded, it was just Mercedes’s way of being considerate.

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Mercedes’s portion of sales from the chocolate and canned goods had finally arrived from Trein Industries. The total sum amounted to a few hundred million

yerks. She seriously had to wonder how much that guy was selling them for.

According to their contract, Mercedes was to receive ten percent of total sales, which meant at the very least, Trein Industries had made a few billion in profits. If you assume yerks are roughly comparable to Japanese yen, that may sound a bit low; for example, yearly sales of Valentine's Day chocolate in Japan roughly totaled fifty billion yen (around three hundred and fifty million USD). But that was only because the population of Japan was so large. While Blut was a metropolis, its population wasn't nearly as large as Japan's, and really, Japan was far too densely populated, given it was such a small island nation. Anyway, to return to the topic at hand, Blut's total population was only in the tens of thousands.

Now, this wasn't a small number. Given the world's cultural development, it was almost too high. The largest city in Germany during the Middle Ages had only had thirty thousand inhabitants at best, and the rest usually were only five thousand or less; it was impressive for any city to reach a population of ten thousand. This was due to the high mortality rate at the time and the fact that an abundance of resources during peacetime led to a decrease in deaths and thus a boom in population.

Returning our focus to the present day, these numbers made the tens of thousands living in Blut seem extraordinarily exceptional. The mortality rate was shockingly low. While magic did exist in this world, it was the traits possessed by vampires that kept the mortality rate so much lower than that during the Middle Ages.

Still, the population couldn't compare to that of the modern day, so making billions worth of sales in a city with less than a hundred thousand—especially considering the short amount of time the products had been on the market—phenomenal. While the products' novelty had most likely given them a short-term sales boost that would likely soon begin to plateau, Trein had done well. He must have focused his target audience on the nobility and dragged them into a fight to buy up his product.

*There are probably some noble houses trying to monopolize the product to prove their wealth.*

Assuming that Trein was selling a bar of chocolate for the (highway robbery) price of ten thousand yerks, selling ten thousand bars would earn him a hundred million yerks in sales. There were only around a hundred nobles in town, and aside from Mercedes's father Bernhard, they were all court nobles without domains of their own. This made sense; as the land was all owned and managed by the Grunewalds, there couldn't be any other nobles with domains. Still, nobles would always be nobles. They had more money than the average man and were exactly the type who liked to flaunt their wealth. The number before Mercedes was almost certainly the result of them trying to buy up the supply for themselves. Basically, they were just suckers.

The canned goods, on the other hand, had not done as well. Still, a portion of Seekers and merchants had recognized their value and became customers, and while Mercedes wasn't a fan of it, she surmised there were merchants buying up both products for resell. Death to all scalpers!

"Now that I have all the funds I need, I guess I should update my equipment and head deeper into the dungeon."

With all the money Mercedes had collected, she no longer needed to be stingy about buying weapons and armor and could now prioritize function over affordability. But at the same time, a higher cost didn't necessarily mean the item was better. It would be totally absurd and a complete waste of money to buy a sword gaudily adorned with jewels, for example. An item could look plain. In choosing her equipment, she'd focus entirely on functionality and elegance of design.

"We're headed to town. Benkei and Kuro, we'll update your equipment too."

Mercedes brought Benkei and Kuro around town to peruse weapons and armor. First, she sold all the weapons she had been using as she no longer had any need for them. Then, she bought a halberd for herself to use. Considering her fighting style, she had always thought that a hammer or axe would best suit her, as gravity magic complemented powerful, heavy weapons well. However, she also needed to make up for her lack of reach. She didn't know if she would grow more since vampires could reach their perpetual age when they were still children, and if this was all the height she would get, she needed to figure out how to compensate for that.



Of course, the ideal weapon to extend reach would be a spear, but since that lacked power, it was a poor fit with her magic. She wasn't interested in swords either, as her limited experience with them gave her the sense she wasn't really suited for the weapon, and she suspected that casting gravity magic on them would only cause them to shatter.

Thus, Mercedes had settled on a halberd. It had the length of a spear, the sharpness of an axe, and a weight that matched her fighting style. But most importantly, it just looked really cool. Having been invented during the Golden Age of close combat, it exhibited both the wit of the wise and the folly of the foolish in a way that tugged at her heartstrings. She could just imagine someone from the time period saying, "Spears might be long, but don't you wanna cut with them too? Don't you also want a claw that can get through your opponent's helmet and armor? Why don't we just mash it all together?" She wasn't sure if that silly thinking had truly been the impetus for creating the weapon, but she found beauty in the combination of ingenuity and foolishness evident in the halberd's design. In other words, her decision had been ninety percent based on appearance.

Mercedes took each halberd into her hand, examining it thoroughly. The one she determined felt best for her was a red one called "Halberd Wurtzite." Apparently, it was of excellent quality with a name derived from the strongest material known to the gods who had arrived on the Red Planet. However, said material no longer existed, so it had been made from something else. Talk about false advertising.

The halberd was as tall as an adult vampire, and the blade was so big that it seemed capable of ripping a person in half with one strike. Most obviously, it was heavy. So heavy, in fact, that no one would buy it—no one except Mercedes, that is. The look on the shopkeeper's face as he watched her lift it with a single hand was priceless.

Next was a coat. She picked an item similar in design to the current black one she wore but with superior durability. She decided against changing up the vest she wore beneath it, as she had no complaints and found it easy to move in. Instead, she simply purchased a few replacements. While the armor was all of excellent quality, they negated her nimbleness, which was one of her greatest

strengths. Not to mention that they didn't even fit her in the first place.

Now that Mercedes had gotten her equipment sorted out, she moved on to Benkei. For him, she purchased some wonderful black armor that she couldn't wear herself in addition to some separately sold gauntlets to protect each of his six arms. The helmet she bought him covered his full face, partly to hide his countenance since it attracted so much attention in town. Still, there was a chance this would only make him stick out more.

As a result of all this, Benkei now looked like a walking suit of armor, but since strength had always been his forte rather than speed, hardening him up with armor seemed best for him. The weight didn't seem to bother him either, as his steps were still as light as they had always been. In terms of weapons, Mercedes decided to affix him with everything including swords, spears, and bows. From now on, she'd be able to adjust his equipment to match the job.

For Kuro's gear, well...while they did have armor for large wolves, it seemed like it would only hinder his movements. Thus, Mercedes decided against it.

Once they were done purchasing equipment, they moved on to consumables. Since they already had provisions, they skipped over that and instead focused on buying recovery items. Unfortunately, this world had no medicines or herbs that could conveniently restore HP in a flash. There were items called "potions," but they were simple salves that didn't take effect immediately. However, what this world did have was magic stones. Of course, some were infused with recovery magic and were quite a popular item among Seekers. Mercedes decided to buy twenty of them alongside some other magic stones, mostly those infused with the powers of ice, water, and fire since she couldn't use those magical affinities herself. Now that their luggage had increased, she also bought a large backpack to have Kuro carry around.

"Master, a word of advice."

"What is it?"

"We exist to be your swords and fight in your stead, but we cannot battle at full power while burdened with luggage. I believe it would be beneficial to add a new member to our group to act as a packman."

"Hmph. I see."

The reason Mercedes had originally welcomed Benkei as a comrade was because she had determined she couldn't hold all her baggage herself, especially not when she was carrying her weapons. Thus, she had wanted someone to carry her items for her. However, Benkei was useful in fights, and even Kuro was speedy and could be useful as a mount. It wouldn't be wise to force either of them to carry her luggage.

"You're right. I do want something that can carry our items and stay out of fights. Let's stop by a pet shop."

Until now, Mercedes had gained all her allies by venturing into dungeons and capturing them herself, but that was only because she had no money. Now that she had the funds, there was no need to go through all that trouble. If she wanted more fighting power, she could venture into the lower floors of the dungeons and capture something herself, but if all she needed was a packmonster, the monsters sold at a pet shop should suffice. Having come to that conclusion, Mercedes set off for their next destination. Of course, the walking armor that was Benkei attracted many stares.

## Chapter 15: Two Choices

In choosing a monster to carry their belongings, Mercedes's mind immediately jumped to horses. They were livestock long utilized for travel and transport, and their sturdy, developed legs were perfect for carrying heavy loads over long distances. Animals used for transport were called "pack animals," and horses were so often used as pack animals the word "packhorse" existed. The connection was so strong that now, the word "packhorse" was even used to describe those who carried heavy burdens of work and responsibility.

However, horses weren't exactly adept at traversing the dungeons. They couldn't exhibit their full potential in closed-off spaces, and some spaces may be so narrow a horse wouldn't even be able to make it through at all. Mercedes contemplated what other creatures were often used as pack animals, which included donkeys, cows, deer, camels, and llamas. She wanted something with strong legs that could carry heavy loads far, but she wasn't sure if any of those would function well in dungeons.

"Do you have any monsters good for carrying luggage? If possible, I want something that can move through narrow spaces like dungeons without getting stressed out," asked Mercedes as she watched the monsters in the cages.

The shopkeeper immediately pointed her over to one of the pens. "I'd recommend a krylia. They're the best monster for carrying baggage through dungeons."

Mercedes had received the speedy response of an expert. They must have had previous customers looking for the same thing as her, which made sense considering a packman was an essential role in any adventuring squad. In fantasy light novels, it's often ignored since the protagonist almost always has a bag that can fit unlimited items, but in reality, the presence of someone to hold your baggage can be the difference between life and death.

Inside the cage the shopkeeper led Mercedes to was a peculiar monster

roughly the same height as her. It largely resembled a rhinoceros, as it had eye-catching stonelike skin and sturdy legs. Its mouth was pointed like a beak, and it had one horn on the tip of its nose and two on the top of its head. Around its neck was a scarf that seemed to be protecting its vitals. It looked like a miniature version of the triceratops that would appear in encyclopedias of Mercedes's old world as it munched away on grass inside its cage with calm eyes.

"This is a krylia. They're very relaxed, easy to tame, and obedient. They have high endurance and prefer closed spaces to open ones. Even heavy loads won't bother them, and while they are usually docile, they can run even faster than horses at full speed."

"Sounds perfect. How much is it?"

"Thirty thousand yerks."

Mercedes immediately decided to buy this miniature triceratops—this krylia—as her packmonster. Now, she'd have something to carry her bags.

With that all out of the way, she decided to stay out of the dungeons and return home to train the krylia for a few days. She also took the opportunity to acclimate herself to her new halberd and raise the group's strength through some mock battles with Benkei and Kuro. Once her thorough preparations were complete, it was time to head into Stark Dungeon and make their way to the bottom floor.

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This time, their goal wasn't mapping, nor was it to capture monsters or gather materials. Their only aim was to reach the final floor, and to that end, they stuck to the shortest route, refraining from any unnecessary battles or detours.

One look at the map that Mercedes had created through many trips into the dungeon let her know exactly where she needed to go. All her previous work had not been for naught. The group limited both their consumption and battles, only participating in those which were absolutely necessary. Thanks to that, they rushed through the dungeon at record speed.

"Jiggle jiggle. I'm a no-good jelly slime."

“You again? I’m here to conquer this dungeon. I doubt we’ll be meeting again.”

“Jiggle jiggle. Good luck!”

“Thanks.”

The slime was situated in the middle of the route, so avoiding it was impossible. Mercedes cut through its core with her halberd and continued onward.

The group wandered deeper and deeper into the dungeon. For unknown reasons, the farther they went, the wider each floor got, making it more like a maze. Mercedes now understood how Trein had run out of food. Even sticking to the shortest route, she couldn’t make it to the bottom in a single day. She was thankful that Benkei knew the way and could easily guide her to the stairs leading to the next floor in unmapped areas.

As they continued deeper, however, monsters grew stronger and the maze grew more complex. Things proceeded smoothly thanks to Mercedes’s preparations and mapping and Benkei’s knowledge, but getting by without those would have been incredibly difficult. You could assume that anyone able to conquer this dungeon on their first try was a monster, but even the speed of Mercedes’s progress far surpassed what common Seeker wisdom would assume was possible.

After five days inside, the group had already made their way to the dungeon’s depths.

“Master, the twenty-fifth floor is next. It is the final floor, so I suggest we rest.”

“Right. Let’s rest here for the day and tackle the final floor tomorrow.”

They had yet to use a single item and still had a surplus of food, enough to sustain them for three round trips in and out of the dungeon. Mercedes opened a can and ate the monster flesh inside with a fork. Then, she gobbled down a chocolate bar and decided to rest for the day. Guard duty would be done on rotation so that each member of the team could get four hours of sleep.

Then the next day, Mercedes and her team came face-to-face with an Asura

ogre yet to be named “Benkei” outside the door that was their destination.

“You have done well to come this far, treasure seeker. However, as long as I remain, you cannot continue forward.”

“I see. So you really were here, Benkei.”

“Master.”

“I know. Have at it.”

Benkei stepped in front of the Asura ogre. They were the same existence, but the differences between them were so vast you could see it at a glance. The Asura ogre looked exactly as it had the day Mercedes had met Benkei, and it was equipped with a sword in each hand. Benkei, on the other hand, was adorned with armor and equipped with a variety of weapons. Mercedes was witnessing a clash between the Benkei who had changed and the one who had yet to do so—a clash between the past and present.

The difference in strength was immediately apparent. As soon as the battle began, Benkei dominated. While both swung their weapons, the quality of those weapons differed. Swords were knocked out of the Asura ogre’s hands one after the other as Benkei broadened the distance between them to attack with long-ranged weapons like a spear and crossbow. In the end, Benkei had not even a moment of struggle before cutting off his former self’s head.

“You did well. I see you’ve grown.”

“It is all thanks to meeting you, master.”

Their weapons differed, but the gap in skill was even greater. Benkei had simply grown stronger than the Asura ogre. Mercedes was now certain her group could conquer this dungeon. Humility may be a virtue and pride a vice, but how could someone clasp victory without the confidence to do so? How can you win if you don’t believe you can? This was the time to be confident and trust that they were strong. It all depended on outlook, as humility at its extreme was just cowardice. Thus, she decided to believe she was strong even if she knew it approached being prideful.

Mercedes looked up to find a door roughly ten meters tall. Something certainly lay beyond it, but she had no way of knowing what until she saw for

herself. All she knew for certain was that it would involve hardship.

“Let’s go. No matter what lies on the other side, I’ve got no plans of turning back now. Come with me to the depths of hell.”

“Certainly.”

“Bark!”

When Mercedes placed her hand on the door, she found that it opened disappointingly easily. Before her was a single brilliant path painted in gold, and beyond that was the door that Benkei had mentioned. She opened it without hesitation.

There, she found a large hall containing two more doors. The right one was gold while the left was black. She could tell she had come to a crossroads, and the nerves had her gulping.

“You have done well to reach here, Seeker.”

A voice reverberated through the hall. Oddly, it sounded like a woman’s voice, or perhaps that of a young boy. For now, Mercedes decided to assume it was a woman who was speaking since that had been her first impression.

“Before you are two doors, but you may only open one. If you seek fame and fortune, open the gold door, as glory is promised beyond. You will face no foes, since you have already conquered this dungeon. You may bring all the treasures you wish back home and live a life abundant with honor and glory. A path leading to the surface that is free of monsters will be there for you as well. But if you choose the gold door, you shall never know what is beyond the black. A door of its kind will never appear before you again, and you will forever lose all memories of its existence. You shall never be able to walk down the path to truth. This applies not just to this dungeon, but all dungeons. You only have one chance to open the door to truth.

“If truth is what you seek, then open the black door. Beyond it lies grueling tribulations, but should you overcome this trial after risking your life, you shall obtain a fragment of this world’s truth. However, it is a merciless trial. Should you fail, you will perish and lose all.

“Well then, it is time to choose. Will you gain truth, or will you lose



everything? Or will you obtain glory? The choice can only be made once. Should you return to the path that led here, the chance to open either door will forever be lost to you.”

Once the voice had finished its speech, Mercedes couldn't help but think that this choice was quite the malicious one. Thinking about it normally, there was no need to even hesitate—the gold door was the only option. Most people able to make it here would have used up all of their strength and be low on items and provisions. Nobody would choose to face even more strife under those circumstances.

However, there was another simple reason to choose the gold door: you could obtain treasure without having to fight for it. Those who ventured into the dungeons did so with the goal of reaching the treasure believed to be nestled deep inside. It was what they sought above all else! There was no reason to choose the black door and risk their lives. The few in the past who had returned from the dungeons with riches had undoubtedly chosen the gold door.

At the same time, though, Mercedes was certain that choosing the gold door would mean that the dungeon would appear once again. It was why seventy percent of the dungeons in this world had yet to be conquered or were reappearing somewhere else. On the other hand, the black door had to have been chosen and the trial overcome in the thirty percent of dungeons that had never appeared again after being conquered. At least, that was what made sense.

“Benkei. Kuro. Are you ready?”

“Yes!”

“Woof!”

Mercedes checked in with her partners behind her and turned back to face forward. “Open the black door. I’m taking on the trial.”

## Chapter 16: The Trial

The black door opened on Mercedes's command, revealing an endlessly vast space. She was baffled at how a room so large could exist in a dungeon, but she made sure to hide the shock from her face as she stepped over the doorframe. Benkei and Kuro followed after her, leaving only their packmonster, the krylia, behind. Once all three were on the other side, the door slowly closed, locking them inside. They'd have to overcome the trial if they wanted to return alive.

"You have done well to come this far, challenger of truth." A voice reverberated from deep inside the room. Unlike the one before, it had the tenor of a man and was apparently the trial itself. "Seeing as you have come this far, there is no need for superfluous words. If you seek truth, show me your power."

"Well, that makes things simple. I just need to beat you, right?"

"Indeed. If you can, that is." As Mercedes and her party assumed their fighting stances, the owner of the voice appeared before them. He was a humanlike creature with crossed arms, but he stood over twenty meters tall. Clearly, this thing wasn't a person. On his back were three pairs of wings, numbering six in total. His left ones were an angelic, glittering ivory; his right ones were a demonic, muddy black. He bore a shining nimbus on his back, and his body was surrounded in dark flames.

*This is just the last floor of one single dungeon, but this guy looks like an entire game's final boss.*

"I am eternal light and eternal darkness. If you seek truth, I shall grant you the release of death."

*And here he goes, spouting those lines that make you think this is a fight that decides the fate of the world. He's just the boss of one dungeon!*

"I am Schwarz Historie, past erased. Unpleasant memories shunned by all and sealed alongside the suffering of days younger."

*Uh-huh. You're just one dungeon's boss.* That was essentially Mercedes's only impression of this trial. She could tell this monster was strong at a glance, and defeating him would certainly be tough, but couldn't he have been something else? This monster was oddly reminiscent of her youth during her previous life—specifically her final year of middle school.

“But you cannot run from your past. No matter how firmly sealed, it does not change atrocities once committed. I am mistakes that can never be erased, sins that can never be forgotten. No matter how strongly you yearn to erase and forget, I dwell inside the hearts of all. I shall free you of your suffering. Now forget all and turn to nothingness!” The Schwarz Historie unfolded his arms and opened them wide. He was about to make his move; Mercedes and her companions took up their stances.



At the same time, the monster launched his first attack, announcing the start of the trial. “Chapter One: Arm Bandage (Arms Untamed).”

Upon announcing the name of the attack, the bandages that were wrapped around the Historie’s arms came undone as black flames burst forth. Even though they didn’t make direct contact with Mercedes, she could feel their heat and knew they would burn her skin. Worse, she was also certain they must have had some additional effect, as she doubted their black color was for purely aesthetic purposes.

Still, that only meant she needed to avoid getting hit. The flames surged in from all sides, but she nimbly dodged them and launched herself to where the Historie stood. She swung her halberd forward, strengthening her attack through gravity magic. However, the Historie simply blocked her attack with his wings. It was as if her weapon had collided with steel. The shock made its way down the blade of the halberd, through its handle, and into Mercedes’s arms. Through earlier experimentation, she knew her attack had the power to rip a gerippe fechter in half, shield and all. Seeing that it wasn’t enough to affect the Historie’s wings just meant she now had a better idea of how sturdy they were.

The recoil from her attack had her body reeling backward, but she simply leaned into that force and did a flip in the air. Once she was upside down, she used her gravity magic to keep herself in place; if you knew how to manipulate gravity, there wasn’t such a thing as upside down and right side up. Then, she spun to the side and swept her halberd sideways. The blow landed, and she immediately followed that up with a thrust into the spot she had just managed to hit. However, this had no effect either. She stuck the blade of her halberd into the same spot over and over, but no matter how many times she did, the Historie remained staunch.

“Chapter Two: Rückseite Selbst (Dark Self Unreal).”

Light shot from the Historie’s wings straight toward Mercedes, who was still suspended in midair. While vampires had an affinity for darkness and could see clearly with little light, bright light blinded them. Their aptitude for the dark meant that they couldn’t live under the source of all life that was the sun. Mercedes closed her eyes immediately, but the light made it to her pupils

before her eyelids could cover them. Her glasses were supposed to protect her eyes from strong light, but it was so bright they could do nothing to obstruct the waves that came her way.

Blindness wasn't the only danger this light brought, though. The moment Mercedes was bathed with the Historie's glow, delusion overtook her; the foul sensation that there was someone else inside her crept up from her feet. In a flash, she had been transported from the room of the trial to a jungle of concrete and skyscrapers. A figure stood before her, grinning, and while the light coming from behind it obscured its face, Mercedes knew exactly who it was.

*"Hey, me. Quite the long face there. Even after being reborn, I see you're still empty inside. I guess what they say is true—even death can't cure stupidity."*

Mercedes was silent. She approached the figure as she concluded that this was an attack on her psyche. Still, she didn't know what the Historie was going for. Did he really think this was enough to affect her? She wasn't particularly fazed being faced with herself, especially with it being her past life whom she had already bid farewell to.

*"You've always been—"*

"Out of my way." Mercedes swung her halberd without hesitation, causing the figure of her past self to disappear. She shook her head and once again looked forward. Her vision was still partially obstructed by the light from before, but it was mostly restored.

Yet even though she had overcome this mental attack, the Historie used that window to take Mercedes into his fists. She immediately assumed a defensive stance and made the fists lighter with gravity magic, causing her to dramatically fall from the Historie's grasp and slam into the floor below. But she flipped back up the moment her back hit the ground, and in an instant, she was once again on two feet. On cue, Benkei and Kuro rushed for the Historie. They didn't seem worried about Mercedes, nor did they try to protect her; she had already instructed them to use the opportunity to attack if she ever appeared to be in danger.

*"Chapter Three: Mitleid Auge (Pitiful Surrounding Eye)."*

In a flash, eyes filled the room. They watched Mercedes and her companions with pity—or perhaps scorn. They observed via all angles, which left her party susceptible, since they could see their every move. The Historie had no blind spots, meaning it was impossible to land any surprise attacks. He saw through Benkei and Kuro's efforts easily and repelled them with his wings.

*"Both mother and child are nobles, yet they live in such destitution."*

*"Ah, how pitiful."*

*"They're so unfortunate."*

Pity emanated from the surrounding eyes, but Mercedes simply ignored them. They weren't even worth paying attention to. Being pitied by others affected her neither negatively nor positively. Their thoughts were worthless, and she couldn't care less about them.

Thus, she let them be and jumped into the air above the Historie. Of course, he could see right through her, but that just meant she needed to launch an attack he couldn't dodge. She lifted her hand and created a field of attraction at the Historie's center. Then, she attacked as the force sucked her toward it, raising her halberd into the air and increasing the gravity acting on the tip of its blade.

*"Gravity times ten!"*

Mercedes timed her spell to the moment she swung her weapon downward, increasing its weight. It shot toward the ground and embedded into the floor. At the same time, the Historie's severed wing fell with a crash. It had worked! Her foe was strong, but her attacks weren't completely ineffective.

Seeing this gave Benkei and Kuro a boost in morale. They joined the fight, coordinating with Mercedes. Benkei made skilled use of his six arms to throw the Historie off-balance while Kuro ran around to confuse him. Then, Mercedes used Kuro as a launching pad to jump into the air and let out a full-force attack. However, the Historie must have known this would put him in danger, as he segued into his next attack.

*"Chapter Four: Waldeinsamkeit (Lonely Isolation)."*

In a flash, Mercedes was surrounded by darkness. She could no longer see

Benkei and Kuro; she couldn't even sense them. The shroud was so total she was even deprived of sound. In settings completely devoid of light, even vampires were blinded.

They had been isolated. Knowing what this spelled for her, Mercedes panicked for a moment, but soon, she had quelled her fretful heart. She had lost her visual and auditory senses, alongside both smell and touch; she couldn't even feel the halberd she knew she was holding. Gradually, she lost the ability to tell if she was even standing. Time muddled together, and she began to feel as if she had been left in this state for hours, but her heart remained unperturbed. Despite feeling as if she herself wasn't even real, she maintained her usual calm.

*I've lost my senses. Everything's still there, but I just can't see or feel them.*

She closed her eyes and swung her halberd despite her disadvantaged state. Even if she couldn't see it, hear it, or feel it, she knew she held her weapon, and she knew their enemy was before her. She couldn't feel if her attack landed, but she continued to swing her halberd with a head as cool as ice.

At the same time, the black flames attacked.

"Gwah!"

Mercedes was enveloped in fire, but she quickly recovered and landed on the ground. The attack had lit her coat ablaze, so she flung it off and took a magic stone from her breast pocket. She had taken some damage, but all her senses except sight had returned. Her attacks must have hit the Historie, depriving him of some of his power. The darkness remained, but she just needed to remain calm and gaze through it. She hadn't been isolated; she just couldn't see her companions.

But the eyes would tell her exactly where they were. Not all of them were targeting her, and who else could they be observing besides Benkei and Kuro? With that in mind, she threw a magic stone imbued with fire on the ground, creating a dramatic explosion that cut through the darkness for just a moment. Then, she jumped into the air and swung her halberd, using wind magic to send forth blades that destroyed the eyes. She repeated this process over and over, and each time her blade flashed, an eye would be destroyed and a little more



light would return.

“Benkei! Kuro! Are you all right?!”

By the time Mercedes could see again, Benkei and Kuro had collapsed on the ground. Having lost their senses, they must have lost the ability to distinguish whether they were standing or lying down. But as soon as they heard her voice, they were up on their feet once again.

“Yes! Somehow!”

“Woof!”

After confirming the safety of her comrades, Mercedes sent her wind blades at the Historie. They knocked him off-kilter, and she made use of the opportunity to jump into the air using her gravity magic and whack her halberd straight into him. The Historie tried using his wings as a shield, but with one severed from his body, she landed a blow on his torso.

“Chapter Five: Heftig Glück (Intense Regret).”

His next attack also came as flames, this time from his face. However, unlike the black flames from before, these were as red as bubbling magma. They burst forth like uncontrollable emotions and filled the room, wriggling around like those regretting their past.

Mercedes slammed down as many water and ice magic stones as she could to defend herself from the attack, but she was unable to completely stave it off. But that was fine; she wasn't looking to block the attack anyway.

“Get down!” On Mercedes's command, Benkei and Kuro distanced themselves from her as much as they could and got on the ground. At the same time, she herself put distance between them as well and used magic stones imbued with wind to erect a defensive wall. The heat of the flames vaporized the water in a flash, creating a phreatic explosion that attacked the Historie. These were capable of flattening mountains; thus they had to be effective against the monster. He had clearly weakened, and his wings were now in tatters.

Kuro rushed forth while Mercedes jumped on top of him. The Historie counterattacked with more flames, but Kuro nimbly dodged them, allowing

Mercedes to focus entirely on offense. After making his way through the flames, Kuro put his paws on the walls and dashed up toward the ceiling.

Mercedes shouted and swung her halberd. It cut through the Historie's side, and Kuro retreated before he could counterattack. Benkei took this opportunity to sub in and launch an attack of his own, firing his crossbow as a diversion as he moved in on the Historie and dug multiple other weapons into his wings.

"Keep at it!" At Mercedes's command, Kuro jumped into the air. She swung her halberd again and again, sending a flurry of strikes at the Historie. Kuro and Benkei followed suit, launching attacks of their own. However, the Historie used his arms and wings to block them and counterattack. It was a three-on-one fight, but they were evenly matched. This thing really did have strength befitting a trial.

"Chapter Six: Unverändlich Einst (Past Unchanging)."

An illusion spread before Mercedes. It was a vision of the end of her previous life; her pitiful fall from the top of a staircase repeated over and over before her eyes. She fell to her death, then fell again, and then again. It happened over and over, until...

"How stupid," she spat as she swung her halberd, cutting through both the illusion and the Historie and bringing her back to reality. What was that? The darkness had simply been filled with a fake vision. That was all. Being shown an illusion and having her senses nullified didn't mean she no longer knew her enemy was before her. It changed nothing. She still simply needed to attack.

However, those thoughts had come too early. In an instant, Mercedes's body was engulfed in flames, and not just her; Benkei and Kuro were suddenly flung into the air and slammed back on the ground. The three stood up, but when the Historie recast the same attack, they were again inflicted with the same damage.

*Is he recreating our past injuries?! Damn it! This could kill us!*

Mercedes forced herself to jump into the air as her body was burning and used the claw of her halberd to slash the Historie's face. If he was recreating their past injuries, there would be no way to block or dodge. All they could do was block the initial attack before it could land.

However, she was so desperate to do so that it caused her to panic. The Historie outstretched a hand toward her, and she didn't have the time to dodge it. He grabbed her by her lapels, rendering her powerless. Then, he tried to once again launch flames from his face. If that attack hit Mercedes head-on, she'd surely take serious damage.

"Damn it!"

Luckily—or perhaps, unluckily—the Historie only had his grip around Mercedes's clothes. She kicked his hand, forcing herself backward and ripping her clothes. Through sheer will, she broke free of his grasp and dodged the flames. Her undergarments were now exposed on her upper half, but she currently didn't have the leeway to care, nor was she the girly type who would squeal in embarrassment over it. Her hair had also come undone, and while it was a shame, this was no time to let it bother her.

"Gravity times...fifty!"

She forced more magic out of her, causing the Historie to collapse on the ground. But this was her limit. With all of her power and focus concentrated on her magic, she couldn't move. Luckily, she had her comrades who could do so for her.

Benkei shot into the air with his crossbow. Pulled by gravity, the arrow dove straight down and pierced the Historie. Once Mercedes made sure of this, she lifted her magic and shifted to a new spell. "Versammeln!"

It was her third original earth magic spell, and rather than gravity, it used magnetic fields. One would spawn in the direction of her outstretched hands, pulling objects toward it. While its power was weak, it was enough to impede their enemy's movements. She had used it previously during the attack where she multiplied the force of gravity by ten, and using it again, she shot herself into the air and let the attractive field accelerate her forward. Then, she kicked the Historie with all she had.

Mercedes didn't stop there either. She grabbed the Historie's large frame and manipulated gravity to allow her to lift him into the air and toss him up into the sky. She then followed that by jumping up and over the Historie, raising her halberd high and stabbing it down into her foe. Half of the Historie's face was

torn off and crashed to the ground.

“Finale: Einst—”

“I won’t let you!”

The Historie tried to make a last-ditch effort, but Mercedes was faster. She stabbed her halberd into his face. No matter how powerful his next attack might be, she didn’t have to fear it if she could prevent him from using it. Her halberd had failed to pierce the Historie, but the real finishing move was what came next. She quickly jumped off the Historie and focused all of her magic into her arms.

*Please hold...*

Magic didn’t come without risk. Equivalent power had to be consumed from the user in the form of a special force known as mana. But using too much mana would leave the user drained, rendering them unconscious, and in extreme cases, killing them. However, Mercedes was willing to assume that risk to claim victory, as she knew that she wouldn’t be able to defeat this foe without it.

“Gravity...times one hundred!”

She let out gravity waves that exceeded her limits and focused them into one spot: her halberd. It cracked and crumbled as she thrust it into the Historie. This time, it worked. With a hole gouged out of his face, the Historie crumpled to pieces as if he had completed his mission.

“Excellent... You are worthy of truth.”

Then, he turned to dust. Once those words of praise left his mouth, the Historie transformed into particles of light and disappeared. Now that Mercedes knew he had been defeated, all her energy left her body and she collapsed on the floor. Luckily, Benkei was there to catch her.

“Are you all right, master?”

“Yeah... Just a bit tired.”

The trial was over. Mercedes grinned, for she had overcome.

## Chapter 17: The Truth of the Dungeons

Upon defeating the Schwarz Historie, another door appeared before Mercedes and her comrades. This one wasn't large or grand, just a crude door made of metal.

She picked up her coat off the floor, threw it over herself, and fastened the buttons. She wasn't particularly embarrassed, but she wasn't a fan of staying in her underwear for too long either. Just to be safe, she used some of her healing magic stones to close their wounds before opening the metal door.

The scene that spread across her eyes was an odd one. The room was the size of a great hall, but it was filled with trees. In the center of those was a round glass tank, and inside it were...monsters. She could see the mole monster, werwolfs, gerippe fechtters, jelly slimes, and even Asura ogres and schwarz wolfangs. Just like she expected, the mole monster had a scar over one of its eyes.

On the other side of the tank was a pedestal with both the swords used by gerippe fechtters and the ones Benkei had originally carried. Also on top of the pedestal was a hole, and after she'd observed it for a short moment, weapons identical to those already there shockingly spurted forth from it. Urged by a gurgling sound from behind her, Mercedes turned around, watching as a monster appeared from a tree trunk and ventured through the door with lifeless eyes. There was now no doubt about it; both monsters and weapons were being duplicated.

"So this is the truth that voice mentioned. The dungeons can produce all the monsters and weapons it wants."

"Indeed. And from now on, it all belongs to you, Dungeon Master Mercedes."

Mercedes hadn't been speaking to anybody in particular, but a voice answered her: the female one from earlier. But while she could hear who was speaking, she couldn't see them. The voice seemed to have no body.

“Who are you?”

“I am Production Number Twelve, Identifying Code ‘Zwölf.’ I am this dungeon itself.”

Even Mercedes was shocked hearing Zwölf’s introduction. She managed to hide most of it from her face, but not completely; she could tell her expression was taut, which told her she still had a long way to go if she wanted to be able to fully conceal her emotions.

A young woman appeared before Mercedes and bowed. Her black hair was tied up and she wore white clothes with glasses. She was beautiful, but her other physical features were what surprised Mercedes. Her ears weren’t pointed, and neither did she have the features of birds or beasts or the catlike pupils characteristic of vampires. She wasn’t Falsch, but *human*—a member of the Homo sapiens species that Mercedes herself had once belonged to.

“Y-You’re human...?”

“Yes and no. While I do have the appearance of a human, it is simply a three-dimensional projection meant to help you interact with me more comfortably. This form is modeled after one of the gods who created me, not I myself. But I am surprised to hear you know the true name of those gods.”

“I just read it in a book.”

“I see. All books from antiquity depicting or describing the names of the gods and their appearance should have been disposed of, but some must still remain. Perhaps the mental lock imposed on the Falsch have weakened with each generation, though they should unconsciously avoid creating documents that record appearances...”

As far as Mercedes knew, humans were no gods. Many myths posited that humans were beings created in gods’ image, but they themselves were still just mortal. She couldn’t ignore this statement. Did the name of the gods who created this world just happen to be “humans,” or was it the humans that Mercedes knew of who decided to call themselves gods? While these may sound similar, their implications were vastly different. She had always assumed this world was an alternate universe with zero connection to her old one, but what if this actually was the same world she had always known?

“You said this all would be mine. Does that mean I can produce monsters and weapons at will?”

“Yes, but not endlessly. Copying monsters and tools requires energy, and if that energy is lacking, they cannot be produced.”

“How do I increase that energy?”

“Energy can be charged over time and through absorbing the self-powered nanomachines—what your language refers to as ‘mana’—that are disseminated through the air.”

Mercedes was starting to get a headache. In practice, her ability to produce these things really *was* limitless. But at the same time, she didn’t even know where to begin with her questions. What did she mean by “imposed mental lock”? Why was she talking about nanomachines? Mercedes was the one who had decided to seek the truth, but this went well beyond her wildest imaginations.

She could produce all the monsters and weapons she wanted... That meant it was possible to gain an army that could match that of an entire country. But there were drawbacks too; if others in the past had made it to the truth of the dungeons, she wouldn’t be the only one who possessed this power. She wasn’t sure why none of them had become key figures in politics and international affairs, but there were undoubtedly people in this world with the power to destroy nations.

“First, please take this Master Key. It is made of indestructible metal and has a self-repair function, so it cannot be broken through normal means. According to records, they have even survived the ‘Holy Flames’ that were used during the War of the Gods and said to be capable of burning whole nations to ashes.” As soon as Zwölf finished her explanation, a jewel appeared before Mercedes. She touched it with quivering hands, causing it to erupt into a faint glow. “You have now been authenticated as Master. Please decide the shape it will take during Idle Mode and Key Mode.”

“I-Idle Mode? Key Mode?”

“The Master Key has two forms: ‘Idle Mode’ for easy transport and ‘Key Mode’ for when it is used as a dungeon key. It may be used as a weapon during

Key Mode, so I recommend having it take the form of a sword, for example.”

“You can’t make it small during Key Mode too?”

“Due to technological limitations, the key must be at least the size of a sword when serving its function as a dungeon key. It has been engineered to be as small as possible, but that is the smallest shape it can take. I sincerely apologize for any inconveniences.”

Mercedes nodded with a grunt as she tried to wrap her head around Zwölf’s explanation. She didn’t understand why, but the Master Key had to be larger than it was during Idle Mode when used as a dungeon key. Most likely, that had to do with a difference in the role being demanded from the object. It wasn’t that the key couldn’t be engineered to be smaller, but that it had too large a function to be carried out while small. On the other hand, the key didn’t have to function during Idle Mode, so it could remain small.

“Then make it a halberd. Can you make it identical to the one I’d been using?”

“Understood.”

The jewel before Mercedes ignored all laws of physics and grew larger, eventually taking on the exact same form of the halberd she had brought into the dungeons. It felt exactly the same in her hand as the old one—or actually, this one felt even better.

“To switch between Idle Mode and Key Mode, please mentally command it to do so while you hold it in your hand. That will change the shape of the key.”

“Huh. You’re right.”

Mercedes did as prompted and watched with amusement as the halberd turned into a jewel and the jewel turned into the halberd. She figured the jewel might be easy to lose, so she decided to combine it with a chain and turn it into an accessory. Flaunting it could attract pickpockets, but attaching the chain to her belt and keeping it in her pocket should work fine.

“As long as you have that key, you will be able to carry the dungeon with you. Please try saying ‘compress’ while the key is in Key Mode. It will seal the dungeon inside.”



“Won’t that seal us along with it?”

“As long as you envision what items you do not wish to be sealed in the dungeon, they will not be stored.”

“All right then... Compress.”

The moment the word came out of her mouth, Mercedes began to slightly regret her decision to test out this function. Her surroundings warped as if the dungeon were being sucked into the halberd—but everything didn’t simply go poof and vanish. The dungeon turned into something that looked like a 3D image still in the modeling phase and disappeared in a way that looked completely unreal. She was alone with her companions in an empty field, the krylia they’d left behind the other door looking at her in utter bafflement.

“Are you beginning to get a sense of how it works?”

“Um, how do I recreate the dungeon?”

“Say ‘Decompress.’”

Mercedes decided to resummon the dungeon before its disappearance could cause an uproar, but it was already too late. A buzz had already begun to spread in the nearby Seeker settlement, and she could tell some of those Seekers were approaching—which made sense. Who wouldn’t be shocked after witnessing a dungeon suddenly disappear?

“It’s time to run, Benkei.”

“Y-Yes, master.”

Their first order of business was escaping before anyone caught sight of them. Mercedes dashed off at full speed as her companions followed after her. Somehow, she had gotten her hands on something far more dangerous than she could have ever imagined.

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A week had passed since Mercedes conquered the dungeon, and the city was in a state of tumult. The fact that Stark Dungeon had suddenly vanished meant that someone must have conquered it, but who? Why hadn’t they come forward? Such talk permeated the whole town, leaving her feeling a tad

ashamed for keeping it secret.

Of course, this all meant that she couldn't take on any Seeker work, but she no longer needed to anyway. Obtaining the dungeon in its entirety meant she had also obtained all the treasure that lay beyond the gold door. Until now, dungeon challengers who made it to the bottom could only take what they could carry, which was but a pittance of the gold. Of course, they had packmonsters meant to increase their carrying capacity, so the gold they brought back was still significant, but in terms of the total treasures the dungeon contained, that amounted to mere crumbs.

However, Mercedes had gotten her hands on all of it. She hadn't calculated the exact worth, but she was quite sure it was enough to topple governments. Once she had actually walked through the gold door herself, her mouth was stuck open in awe. The room was about the size of three gymnasiums, piles of gold and coins, stacked high like manga, filling the room. She never thought she'd even see a mountain of coins so high it reached the sky, much less come into possession of one. What was she even supposed to do with all this?

Mercedes also learned that those with dungeon keys could view the dungeon even without physically conjuring it into existence. By simply thinking about it, they could see a three-dimensional image of their dungeon unfold before them. But what most surprised her was that dungeons even had expansion capabilities that allowed their masters to redesign their interior. Dungeons could be expanded, but since that consumed mana, they couldn't be grown endlessly. However, mana could be recovered by deleting or reducing the size of other items, meaning that if she so wished, she could remodel the dungeon so that the entire area of the twenty-five floors was contained in just a single floor.

"I see... That's why dungeons always reappear no matter how many are conquered."

"Should a challenger to a dungeon choose the gold door, the dungeon disappears, randomly restructures itself, and appears elsewhere. New dungeons do not technically appear."

"So the same dungeons were being reconfigured and reappearing."

Mercedes was certain that no one had pieced together that the reason the number of dungeons was always increasing was something so simple. They, in fact, *weren't* increasing; the same ones were simply being reused. It was believed that thirty percent of the world's dungeons had been conquered, but in reality, the percentage was probably less than ten, as almost everyone would pick the gold door over the black.

“There’s something strange about that, though. Even I was able to overcome the trial, which means more dungeons should already be conquered. There should be plenty who’ve crossed the black door like I have, right?”

She found it strange that so few people had conquered a dungeon. Even with the choice of door aside, a young girl like herself had been able to step through one, which meant plenty of people should have been able to make it that far. It stood to reason that there should have been many who had overcome the trial on the other side of the black door.

Zwölf, however, seemed quite exasperated by this question. “It appears that you do not give yourself enough credit, master. I take it you never had a source for comparison.”

“Well, I suppose I’ve never seen another vampire fight up close.”

“The Asura ogre and schwarz wofang who serve you are programmed with enough strength that even a number of well-trained vampires should only barely be able to defeat them. To put it simply, even a group of A rank Seekers would struggle, with just one mistake being enough to doom the whole group to annihilation. The Schwarz Historie you fought in the trial is strong enough to rival armies.”

Mercedes thought Zwölf had to be exaggerating. While she had always been quite certain she was strong, the idea that she was capable of taking on an entire army was absurd. This whole country was filled with vampires, a species in which even a young girl can easily lift a hundred kilograms and any old lady could easily beat humanity’s world record for fastest sprint as long as she was somewhat trying. It was obvious how strong a whole army of vampires could be. It wasn’t hubris for Mercedes to admit she was strong, but it would be if she claimed she was *that* strong.

Mercedes's sense of the average level of strength in this world was still heavily distorted. Without anyone to compare herself to, she had yet to realize how truly abnormal her own strength was.

## Chapter 18: An Unwelcome Invitation

After conquering the dungeon, Mercedes updated her gear. She didn't buy anything new; since the dungeon's treasure troves were littered with high-grade equipment, she opted to use those to replace her tattered clothes. Her new outfit was the opposite of her previous Seeker-friendly attire, looking instead like something the normal noble would wear. She wore a red waistcoat over a white button-up with gray pants and black boots reaching up to her shins. On top of all that was a black chesterfield coat and an ascot tie wrapped around her neck, giving a casual vibe.

Functionality mattered more than design to her, but that didn't mean she was completely uninterested in fashion. Sure, she'd pick functionality if she could only choose one, but she'd pay at least a little mind to looking nice whenever she could. She had now built the foundations she needed in life and obtained riches, giving her the freedom to consider designing her outfits. All of this had resulted in her current vogue attire.

Of course, her outfit wasn't all about appearance; she had chosen these items solely for their defensive stats. Not only were they comfortable, they were highly effective at repelling blades, bullets, and heat while also providing some protection against other types of physical impacts. Additionally, they were sturdy and adjusted in size to match the wearer. The difference in strength between her current and previous armor was vast, and according to Zwölf, her new set had been created with the technology of the gods.

Mercedes had turned her dungeon key into a broach, fitting the jewel inside a heart-shaped pendant. To keep it from being stolen, she attached that broach to a chain which she then affixed to her belt. Obviously, she refrained from flaunting the object and stowed it inside her pocket.

Once she had further examined the dungeon's treasure troves, she found herself drawn to the magic stones. At a glance, they looked like any other stone, but unlike the ones she already had, these weren't expendable and could be

used forever. Of course, magic stones weren't exactly rare. Some monsters dropped them as spoils, and the discovery of how to produce them had caused them to flood the markets in recent years, making it difficult to consider them valuable.

However, the vast majority of those stones were single-use, and even those that could be reused didn't last forever. The only ones that could were the few recovered by people who had previously conquered dungeons, and since they tended to keep them for themselves, very few were on the markets. Consequently, those that were were so expensive they only fell within the budgets of nobles. She decided to follow in her predecessors' footsteps and not sell the stones. Instead, she imbued them with her gravity magic and affixed them to a bracelet she would wear at all times. Thus, she could continuously burden her body to train it further.

Currently, Mercedes was at Margaret's house, as she had come to teach the younger girl to read and write. Her manor was even more decrepit than Mercedes's, completely unbefitting for a noble. The floorboards creaked with each step, and a huntsman spider was on the wall leading a cockroach extermination. Margaret's mother was so sickly that she could rarely get out of bed.

"I heard all about you from Margaret! You're Mercedes, yes? Thank you so much for what you've done for my daughter. I hope you can stay good friends." Oddly, her mother didn't speak formally to Mercedes—or perhaps, it *wasn't* odd. No matter her mental age, Mercedes was in the body of a ten-year-old, so Margaret's mother most likely assumed she had simply come for a playdate.

While Mercedes did find her to be a surprisingly happy and relaxed woman, she kept things brief and only exchanged light pleasantries before heading off to teach Margaret, which was surprisingly difficult. Mercedes had always been much better at teaching herself than others, and while all it required was explaining in simple terms, she found that harder than learning a completely foreign language.

In her previous life, she'd completely lacked the ability to teach others. When you learn something yourself, you only need to find a method that works for you and repeat it. But she'd continuously found that whenever she tried to get

others to copy her methods, they'd lose all motivation and give up. She could understand this if they just *couldn't* do it, but these people simply chose not to, and the thing she understood the *least* was when people were deciding not to do something but saying they couldn't.

She would find an effective method, tell people to follow it, and tell them that repetition was the key to success. It wasn't as if she were asking for the impossible; she simply wanted them to accomplish what *she* normally could. And yet, everyone said that she was too strict and lacked understanding for others.

Mercedes would tell them over and over again, "Why won't you do it? It's not that you can't, you just don't want to. Stop making excuses." But that only pushed others away, and eventually she found herself isolated and convinced she didn't need people like that. Then one day, she was *all* alone.

*Calm down. The past is the past. I am who I am now. How many times do I have to tell myself that person wasn't me? I am Mercedes Grunewald, not ■■■■.*

Mercedes reassured herself that things would be fine. She couldn't help the mistakes in her past that had led to her isolation, but she wasn't the person she once was. She knew why she'd failed; she was mistaken about perseverance. She never thought that devoting daily time and effort to reach her goals could bring her suffering; rather, she found the feeling of getting closer to that goal exhilarating. But not everyone was like that, and based on her memories from her past life, she knew that it was much more common for someone to lag behind in their efforts.

Why were people more willing to dedicate themselves to immediate pleasure than something like studying that would reap later benefits? Why did people waste their limited time on amusement and not on diligent learning for the sake of their futures? She didn't know the answers to those questions. She wasn't asking others to have no fun; she knew that play in moderation was essential and helped mitigate stress, though that didn't mean people should waste their time, did it? It completely baffled her, but at the very least, she knew there had to be some psychology behind it. While she still couldn't comprehend why people hated taking steps which would benefit their futures, believing herself that it was clearly efficient, effective, and fruitful to do so, she decided to

accept fact as fact: others simply despised effort and had a hard time sticking to their goals.

*I'll give her moderate praise, moderate scolding, and rewards for her accomplishments. I need to start by fostering motivation... All right. I can do this.*

Mercedes laid the teaching materials she'd brought across the table. She decided to begin with simple things that required minimal study. It was okay if progress was gradual; as long as Margaret continued forward without taking any detours, she'd reach her destination eventually. Mercedes believed the most crucial thing was to avoid pushing her too hard.

"Before we begin, how many letters have you gotten through?"

"Um... I can write all the ones up to here."

Mercedes remained expressionless, but internally, she was impressed; Margaret had been studying on her own. The language of this world closely resembled Japanese, and to illustrate the girl's progress in those terms, she had memorized up to the "ta" row of the hiragana chart, meaning she had learned about half the basic syllabary. It seemed they'd be able to progress faster than Mercedes had been expecting. But as soon as that thought occurred to her, she realized the errors of her thinking.

*Wait. I can't just push her onward. I need to reward her first.*

The carrot and stick approach was famous. To keep people motivated, you can't just punish them with the stick; you need to treat them to snacks like carrots as well. Unfortunately, Mercedes had no carrots, so she had to use chocolate instead.

"You've made good progress. Good job. I was planning on giving you a piece for every letter you memorized, but...here's some extra. I'll give you three."

Chocolate was currently a popular snack among the rich. Its price continued to balloon thanks to said popularity and certain nobles' attempts to monopolize it, to the point where a single bar was now worth twenty thousand yerks. To the bourgeoisie who were spending a fortune on the stuff, Mercedes's reward would have seemed excessively lavish, but from her perspective, she was simply



handing over a snack with less value than the kind of chocolate you could buy for a hundred yen. Still, the reward had motivated Margaret, leading to a smooth studying session.

Once their lesson was over, Mercedes headed home, only to find a carriage with an unfamiliar crest waiting outside her house. Benkei and Kuro stood blocking its path while a well-dressed man desperately tried to convince them to let him through. There were quite a few people collapsed on the ground around them, alongside other signs of battle. What exactly had happened here?

For now, Mercedes decided to just ask and approached Benkei and the others. “What happened here, Benkei?”

“These men here suddenly insisted that we let them visit the manor. Due to their coercive attitudes, I assumed them to be enemies and attacked.”

“Elaborate.”

Benkei’s explanation was as follows: A carriage suddenly appeared in front of the house while Mercedes was away. They demanded passage, claiming to have business with her and her mother, but of course, Benkei wasn’t going to let them in without knowing the reason for their visit, so he asked them to explain themselves. At that, one of the accompanying soldiers shouted at him for his insolence and drew his sword, leading Benkei to conclude they were enemies and engage them in battle. After he’d broken both their arms and legs and destroyed their swords and armor, the soldiers were left unable to fight, and Benkei and Kuro simply awaited Mercedes’s arrival.

“W-Wait a second, Lady Mercedes! We are no enemies! I am a servant of House Grunewald! We have come to deliver you an invitation.”

“From House Grunewald...? Ah, this must be about the birthday party for the legal wife’s son.”

“Y-You are already aware?”

“Somewhat.”

It looked like she was being invited to this too. Bernhard’s dismissal of Mercedes was probably the reason they were so late in delivering the letter. Though if it was up to her, she’d rather they have just left her alone.

Mercedes scanned the letter and confirmed that the details largely matched what Boris had told her. The party was scheduled five days from now. Quite honestly, she wanted to decline, but this was most likely an “invitation” in name only. In reality, it was a demand. If she were the only one involved, she could have just played hooky, but she didn’t want to tarnish her mother’s reputation in the process.

“I see. Tell him I’ll be there.”

“Y-Yes, my lady. Thank you very much.”

“Also, this doesn’t have anything to do with the birthday party...but who was the idiot who drew his sword?” Mercedes’s eyes grew cold as she cracked her knuckles.

Vampires had a sixth sense that allowed them to smell danger, and the man before Mercedes was certainly getting those vibes from her. The air around her was thick with tension, and the birds in her vicinity all flew up into the sky at once. He found her terrifying. How could a young daughter of a concubine already have such a strong aura?

“P-Please wait just a moment. My man didn’t act out of malice. I beg for your forgiveness...”

“I don’t want to see him anywhere near here again.”

“Y-Yes, ma’am!”

Despite her questioning, Mercedes had already honed in on one of the men collapsed on the ground. The servant hadn’t answered her, but she still knew who had been the first to draw their sword. One soldier had reacted more strongly to her question than the others, leading her to conclude that he was the idiot who had escalated the situation. And while she didn’t speak this aloud, she told him with her eyes that if he disobeyed her request, he was as good as dead.

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“Tell everyone that your injuries were a result of us falling down a hill,” commanded the servant as he and his soldiers made their way back to the Grunewalds’ main residence. The man who had delivered the letter was a

servant of Lord Bernhard, and he wasn't a fan of this charade to invite all the concubines' children to one party. As the son of Lord Bernhard's legal wife, Felix Grunewald had received an excellent education beyond compare while the sons and daughters of the concubines had been all but abandoned. In a fight between them, it was obvious Felix would come out on top.

In other words, the concubines' children were invited to act as Felix's stepping stone. His victory was assured. At least, that's what the servant had thought.

"B-But...!"

"No buts! Just do as I say and don't escalate this any further. Falling out of Lord Bernhard's favor will get you killed."

Now, however, he feared the impossible could happen—that there was a chance his stepping stone plan had backfired, and they had invited a fiend instead. The two monsters Mercedes commanded were high caliber; even a group of ten soldiers would have a hard time defeating them. Not to mention, ogres were only faithful to those who had bested them in battle, meaning she herself had to be just as strong if not even stronger.

However, what had frightened the servant most were her eyes. They were cold, as if she were looking at an object rather than a person. Her icy pupils focused on nothing but herself and her family, and it scared this servant... They were the exact same eyes as her father, Lord Bernhard.

## Chapter 19: Felix Grunewald

Newspapers were read by a portion of nobles and merchants within this country of vampires. As type printing had yet to be invented, all books had to be written by hand, meaning it was impossible to mass-produce newspapers. Additionally, the literacy rate was low enough that even if they made newspapers for the public, most wouldn't be read.

However, that didn't mean the masses lacked a means of obtaining information. Every night at the same time, someone would stand on the street corners and read the newspaper aloud to spread the daily news; it was an occupation created by the low literacy rate.

"Trein Industries has invented a way of sealing time in a container. Using this technology, summer, spring, and fall can exist within a container no matter the season, preserving produce as if it were still growing in the field. The age of preservation via pickling and smoking has come to an end! Flavors can be preserved as they are, undoubtedly revolutionizing voyages across the sea!" read out the man with grandiose gestures as he switched his attitude to match his words. The nighttime street bustled with life as a single carriage passed through.

Inside it sat Mercedes, her mother Lydia Grunewald, and their old maid. For assurances, Mercedes had sealed Benkei and Kuro away inside the dungeon in her halberd. Incidentally, she had recently dubbed this halberd "Blut Eizen," as she thought calling it just "my halberd" would get old given the long time they were bound to spend together.

"But wow, Mercy! I didn't know you made enough money to rent a carriage like this!"

"Yeah, my work as a Seeker is going well." Since Lydia was so relaxed, Mercedes tried to match her. Her attitude was usually as pointed as an unsheathed sword and as cold as ice, but that was simply because she distrusted others, which also meant that if she did trust someone, she could

sheathe the sword and melt the ice. She wasn't cold to her core.

"I would never have thought we'd be invited to such a party. I do hope there aren't any nefarious plots afoot..."

"Don't worry, Nan. The son of Lord Bernhard's legal wife is simply trying to flaunt his superiority to those in attendance to affirm his right to be heir. He should be satisfied as long as I play along and lose."

Mercedes had no intention of winning this silly event. She didn't want to draw his ire, nor did she want to get roped into a power struggle, so the simplest option was play along for a little bit and lose when it seemed appropriate. She never wanted to inherit the title of Head of House Grunewald, and she wasn't trying to prove anything either. If losing meant she'd get a small settlement and be completely disowned, she couldn't ask for anything better. She'd gladly discard the Grunewald name *without* a settlement. That didn't mean her father was evil, though. It was completely normal and natural for a noble to hand his non-heir children a small parting gift of money and banish them from the family. It was even common to send your kid to war if you didn't want an extra mouth to feed! Basically, morality was defined quite differently in this world.

After a few hours of being shaken by the carriage, they arrived at the Grunewald residence, which was as gaudy as imaginable. In noble society, the size and grandeur of one's manor was a means of flaunting power, so they tried to make them as large and lavish as possible to demonstrate their influence.

Many nobles were gathered in a hall illuminated by the light of a chandelier, holding glasses and chatting. Parties like this served as an opportunity to forge alliances and discuss business with those you normally wouldn't see day to day, so nobles actively tried to fraternize with those they believed would be useful to them. Just as Mercedes predicted, she was left almost completely alone; on the other hand, a large crowd had surrounded Trein, who had also been invited. So many nobles came to visit him that he had not even a moment of respite, and while he wasn't a noble, his recent invention of canning and chocolate had made him the talk of the country.

In a corner of the hall, the other children of concubines had congregated in a circle. But as soon as Mercedes glanced their way, they hurriedly averted their

eyes. Margaret was with them as well, making herself small to avoid notice.

The center of the hall was wide, which Mercedes assumed was because it was typically used for dance parties, but tonight, it was probably where she would fight Felix. Well, given that she was determined to lose anyways, she didn't really pay much mind. Instead, she decided to get some food.

The menu featured low-alcohol beer, sausage, potatoes, and white bread. The last was the sort of thing Mercedes expected to find at a party of nobles, but the rest left her completely underwhelmed. Unfortunately, there was nothing that could be done about the food. The land in this vampiric country was barren, making it hard to grow wheat. At the same time, water was valuable but hard to come by, so alcohol was the primary beverage of choice since it rarely went bad. Because potatoes could grow even in barren soil, they were prized by commoners and nobles alike, and the sausages were made by farmers using the whole pig. This wasn't from a culinary mindset of using every part of the animal to create something delicious, but out of the sincere need to use the guts and all to survive the winter.

Given the large number of guests, it was partly natural that most of the food had to be cheap, but the real reason was that vampires could survive on blood alone. As long as some had been mixed into their food, vampires would find anything delicious, leading to a culture that lacked the culinary arts and had underdeveloped methods of food preservation. It was much faster and healthier to drink the blood of a winter monster captured by a Seeker than go through the process of making jerky and eating that. Thus, sausages were the only thing that could be considered a "dish," and the state of cooking in this country was shockingly rudimentary.

In fact, sausages hadn't even been invented by vampires, as they only needed blood to survive through the winter. Instead, it had been chimäres. The vast majority of dishes were invented by those other than vampires; their vampiric country had not a single cuisine to its name. Perhaps chocolate's success could be chalked up to these circumstances.

The type of sausage vampires most preferred was of course blood sausage. It resembled liver in taste and was highly nutritious, and while Mercedes was against drinking blood in principle, she could eat these without qualms.

She had spent about half an hour eating when the man of the hour arrived.

“I thank you all for coming.” The young man was blond and appeared to be about fourteen or fifteen. Males tended to reach their perpetual ages a tad slower than females, and he appeared to still be growing.

Next to him was a man who appeared to be in his late twenties or early thirties, perhaps even late thirties. He was tall with blue hair, sunken cheeks, and a sharp chin, but what captured Mercedes’s attention most were his eyes. They were gold and so cold he looked like he’d lost all faith in everything.

*That’s the legal wife’s son...and my father.*

Mercedes casually watched her father—then their eyes met. This was the reunion of a father and daughter who had never stood face-to-face, but they both looked at each other with icy distrust. Two pairs of golden eyes observed each other as if they were staring at a pebble on the roadside, and eventually, they both turned away as if they had lost interest in the other.

Meanwhile, Felix had begun his speech and was thanking the guests for their attendance with grandiose gestures. It would have been nice if things ended there, but unfortunately, they didn’t, and eventually, his speech derailed in the direction of dragging in his siblings just as Boris had warned her of.

“As you all know, I have invited my fellow siblings of Grunewald blood to this event. As entertainment, I have decided to pit our strengths against each other.”

Felix didn’t have to say his true aim for the guests to deduce it. By defeating his siblings, he hoped to dissuade them from trying to usurp him and also convince everyone in attendance that he was fit to be heir. Even an idiot could have put this together.

Yet, none of the guests voiced these thoughts. They took this “entertainment” to be a ritual. It was obvious that Felix would win, so there shouldn’t be any need to fight. Instead, this was simply a rite of passage to get the guests to accept Felix as future heir of House Grunewald. Thus, they bit these thoughts back and played along, oohing and aahing in rapt excitement.

“Without further ado, my siblings! To the front!”





*Ugh, what a pain. This is the absolute worst,* Mercedes bemoaned, before standing up and heading to the front. But this caught Felix and the other guests off guard. They were certain that she'd be afraid, or at least pay some attention to the surroundings, but she walked right up to Felix without a sliver of nerves. Boris, Gottfried, Monika, and Margaret followed after her, and unlike Mercedes, they seemed a bit nervous, as their faces were taut. Margaret even looked like she was about to cry.

"My five brave siblings and I will test our strength against each other. However, I am not the type of man who would hit a lady, so I shall therefore have my three sisters come up at once and I will prove my strength by withstanding a blow from each of them."

Felix's words lifted a weight off Mercedes's shoulders. Had he been the type of hooligan who could beat up a scaredy-cat like Margaret for his own self-centered aims, Mercedes would have had to switch plans and put him in his place. At the very least, he had the makings of a gentleman, which meant Mercedes could lose gracefully.

"Then let us start with you."

Felix first pointed at Margaret. She timidly looked around before settling her eyes on Mercedes, who gave her a nod. With that, the girl focused and punched Felix. Still, a young girl's punches couldn't be underestimated; as a vampire, she had the strength to knock out an MMA world champion with just one blow.

But Felix simply withstood her attack with a grin before lifting her into the air as if nothing had happened. "Thank you. Ladies and gentlemen, a round of applause for this brave little lady!"

Well, such an outcome was only natural. Though she may have been a vampire, others couldn't be injured by a punch from a young girl. Just as Felix had announced, he made no attacks of his own and instead played the part of a kind older brother in order to emphasize his gentlemanly demeanor. He likely planned on treating his other two sisters the same.

Monika was next up, and her attack was stronger than Margaret's. However, Felix withstood her drop kick and lifted her into the air just as he had done with Margaret.

“Next up is you. Approach!”

Mercedes was silent. She didn’t quite know what to do—how much power should she use? Thinking about it, this was her first time fighting a fellow vampire. Felix had to be strong...probably, at least. Plus, he was an elite who had received the best education there was, meaning he might be even stronger than her.

*Well, I guess I should punch with about thirty—no, twenty—percent of my strength.*

Twenty percent of her strength was just enough to kill a weak monster like a gerippe fechter. Benkei and Kuro could withstand such a blow, but it would be useless against the Schwarz Historie. Given all this, Mercedes thought this was the way to go.

*Well, I’m sure he’ll withstand it...probably.*

Mercedes briskly approached Felix, looking completely disinterested. He was taken aback at how naturally she moved her hand, as the punch created a shock rippling over his torso so forcefully he thought it would smash his organs. For a moment, he couldn’t figure out what had happened. He thought his innards were done for. He thought his bones had been crushed. Yet, he knew the eyes of his father and all the other nobles were on him, so he resisted the urge to fall to his knees. If that hadn’t been the case, he would have succumbed to the pain and collapsed.

“Wh-Wh-What a wonderful blow! A round of applause for this brave challenger!”

Felix was at his breaking point, but he frantically put on a brave face and pretended like nothing was wrong. Therefore, the guests hadn’t noticed just how much pain he was in. He suffered through overwhelming nausea and kept the pain hidden from his face. Considering how difficult this was, his performance deserved a medal.

*He really is an elite. I should have used a bit more force.*

Even Mercedes concluded she had gone too easy on him, not that she’d ever intended to actually win. Still, had she used any more force, Felix wouldn’t have

been able to keep up with this charade. He gingerly looked to his torso, worried that the impact had been so strong it smashed through his stomach and caused his innards to fall out. Luckily, that wasn't the case. His stomach was still intact and his innards still there, yet the blow had been so strong his fear was real.

Mercedes brazenly began to speak. "You really are the legal son. You didn't budge an inch. I surrender. You win, I lose. You really are the only one fit to be heir." After spitting out all that and accepting her loss, she quickly left.

Watching her, Felix felt a shiver run down his spine. After experiencing that punch just now, he was certain of something: *She...she was going easy on me.*

Had she used her full strength, he would have undoubtedly perished. Knowing this, he couldn't stop a cold sweat from flooding down his back.

## Chapter 20: Rampage

The Grunewald brothers fought in the hall as the other noble guests spectated. Unlike when Felix battled the girls, he now counterattacked. He even let Boris and Gottfried take him on at once, though it was unclear whether that was due to his superiority complex or because he wanted to prove his strength. Still, he had the advantage even fighting two against one with the damage he had suffered from Mercedes. He gracefully dodged their attacks, seeming more like he was playing with them than fighting them.

In vampire society, strength was the ultimate, most basic symbol of status. While one's position of birth and social status did play a role, strength reigned supreme. That even applied to Seekers too, as those who had reached A rank or higher were awarded medals by the state and given noble status. From that perspective, this country afforded equal opportunity to all—key word *opportunity*, which wasn't easy to come by. The strength of one's blood determined one's brawn; it was hereditary, with those born to strong parents easily able to become strong themselves, and those born to weak parents become relatively frail. Vampires were a race that prioritized blood above all else, and thus, the level of talent passed down by blood and genes went beyond that of humans.

While it was certainly possible to overcome nature through nurture, that didn't mean it was easy. All of this was exactly why Felix viewed his blood siblings as threats and wanted to solidify his position by demonstrating his strength over them.

"What do you think is going to happen?"

"That's obvious. Those two can't beat Felix. It's already game over." Mercedes responded to Margaret's question with brutal honesty. Boris and Gottfried were trying their best, but the skill gap between them and Felix was too great. Those who received elite educations were leagues apart from those who didn't.

"I do believe you could win, however, no?"

“Your name is Monika...right?”

“So you remember me. I’m delighted.”

Mercedes’s half-sibling Monika Grunewald butted into the conversation. Her golden ringlets gave her the air of a high-class lady, and while it wasn’t really relevant, Mercedes couldn’t help but notice that gold hair was quite common in the family. Their father, Bernhard, had the same blue hair as Mercedes, yet none of the others had inherited the color. That meant they must have all taken after their mothers, which led Mercedes to wonder if Lord Bernhard had a thing for blondes.

“Your tone has changed, I see.”

“My apologies for back then. I do hope you’ll forgive me for not having understood your greatness.”

Mercedes was a tad bewildered by the change in Monika’s attitude as she watched her brothers fight. They hadn’t spoken much when they first met, but from what Mercedes could remember, she was casual with her speech and spoke as if she were addressing someone beneath her. This wasn’t exactly strange, as while they were both daughters of concubines, their mothers’ positions in the harem differed. Monika always seemed well put together, and there was enough leeway in her financial situation to purchase expensive treats like chocolate and even share a piece with Margaret. Her mother was likely a noble, and from her perspective, Mercedes was nothing more than a low-class girl born to a common townswoman. The haughty attitude she took with Mercedes was only natural.

But now that they had met for a second time, Monika was suddenly addressing Mercedes with respect, dropping the haughtiness entirely. What had happened to cause this?

“I was utterly charmed by your strength. You gave off the kind of calm aura of someone truly powerful! I think you’re much more suitable for taking the Grunewald name than Boris or Felix.”

“Unfortunately, I’m not interested. Felix can have that title.”

“I had figured that must be your line of thinking. You wouldn’t have

purposefully lost a winning fight otherwise.”

Mercedes glanced at Monika. Her sudden attitude change was a bit off-putting, and Mercedes couldn't quite figure out her aim in this. Was she trying to curry favor, or was it something else? In any case, it seemed wise to not let her guard down.

“I don't know what you're talking about. Look. The fight's over.” Mercedes forced the conversation to an end and returned her gaze to the hall. Boris and Gottfried were collapsed on the ground while an uninjured Felix bathed in the applause of his guests. Mercedes decided to join along in the fanfare, assuming an outward acceptance of Felix.

However, what caught her attention most was Lord Bernhard. While his son had claimed victory, his expression was unchanged, lacking even the slightest hint of joy. She simply chalked it up to him being hard to please and decided to stop thinking about the man.

“That concludes the battle. A generous round of applause for my brave siblings!” Felix, the victor, elegantly bowed before his noble audience, eliciting comments like “he truly deserves to be heir!” as they played along with his charade. Still, there was nothing for them to find interesting in this farcical victory.

For Mercedes, who didn't want to be heir in the first place, and Margaret, who had long given up, this simply marked the end of his silly show, but that wasn't true for Boris. He was humiliated, which was natural considering he had been invited here to be used as a stepping stone and foil for Felix in front of everyone. One would have to be a saint to quell their anger in such a situation; it was much easier to seethe. His rampage was inevitable.

“Don't...mess with me!” Boris reached his hand into his breast pocket and pulled out a stone that glittered purple. Then, he threw it to the ground. His erratic behavior was interpreted by the present nobles, Felix, and even Mercedes as him simply breaking an object out of frustration. “Decompress!”

However, once Mercedes heard those words, her eyes flung open—that was the phrase to release a dungeon. For a moment, she concluded that Boris must have conquered one, but she immediately thought better; he wasn't strong

enough to accomplish such a feat. Yet, when a large monster so tall it reached the ceiling appeared from that shattered stone, she had to seriously consider that possibility.

Releasing a monster through the incantation of “decompress” was something Mercedes could do. When those with dungeon keys “compressed” a dungeon, they were able to keep certain items decompressed. Similarly, they could keep certain items compressed—sometimes, everything in the dungeon except a certain item—when decompressing a dungeon, meaning that summoning a monster by decompressing it alone was possible.

*Zwölf, does he have a dungeon?*

*“No, master. That is a single-use item which appropriates dungeon technology. They are known as seal stones, and unlike magic stones which store mana, they store physical objects.”*

*I’ve never seen one before.*

*“Indeed. They can only be made in dungeons. Of course, you are able to make them as well.”*

*So only those who’ve conquered a dungeon can make them, right?*

*“Yes. But given the circumstances, it is highly unlikely that Boris has conquered a dungeon himself. Had he, he would have summoned many more monsters.”*

Mercedes exchanged some whispered words with Zwölf. She learned that the stone Boris had used must have come from a dungeon conqueror, but Zwölf also clarified that the chance Boris had conquered a dungeon himself was extremely small. That left only two possibilities: either he’d obtained a seal stone put on the market by a fellow dungeon conqueror, or that conqueror had personally handed him that stone.

The sudden appearance of the monster sent the hall into chaos as soldiers challenged the monster in an attempt to regain control of the situation. However, this monster was strong and easily kicked them aside. It wasn’t just intimidating in strength, but in appearance as well. It stood over three meters high, was completely shrouded in black, and had a bipedal silhouette that resembled a human’s. There was no hair on its body, and its crimson eyes

lacked intelligence. It had the fierce look of an ogre, with sharp fangs sticking out of its mouth and a horn protruding from its forehead. Bat-like wings jutted out from its back, and all in all, it fit the description of the word “demon” perfectly.

*“That is a Böse dämon, and they are commonly found in the lower floors of dungeons. Their strength rivals that of Asura ogres.”*

As Mercedes listened to Zwölf’s explanation, she prepared herself to defend her mother, Margaret, and even Monika at a moment’s notice. The vampires had become restless, but all refrained from foolishly rushing to the doors in a panic, which made sense given strength in their society directly reflected one’s honor. While the sudden appearance of a monster had caused a disturbance, they all calmly remained in place as they tried to wrap their heads around the situation.

“Stop it, Boris! Where do you think we are?!”

“Who cares?! We’re about to be kicked outta this family! We’ll be given a pittance and thrown to the wolves, just like you wanted! Screw what happens next! Either way, you’re coming down with me!”

As Mercedes tried to keep an eye on the situation, the room descended into pandemonium. Felix was wrong to do this; he had pushed Boris too far. Resorting to such actions was far from rare in noble society, nor was it deserving of reproach. He was simply trying to emphasize his own worthiness while flaunting his strength to his siblings. It happened in every family, and just as Mercedes had given him credit for, he deserved some praise for avoiding methods like assassination.

However, that didn’t mean those exploited in the process would accept that; there was no way they would. From Boris’s perspective, he’d been used as a convenient foil for Felix and would now be disowned as a result. All the while, the man responsible was flashing a smile while playing the part of a gentleman. Who would simply shut up and take that? Anger was only natural, and no one could blame him for wanting a bit of revenge.

Usually, things would have simply ended there. Despite the disdain, chagrin, and desire for revenge, most wouldn’t have been able to make that wish a



reality and instead would've given up. But somehow, Boris had obtained a means to materialize his retribution, and he had been so cornered he was able to use it without fear for future consequences.

Coincidence and Felix's indiscretion had made the impossible possible, and Felix couldn't run from the blame he assumed for having created these circumstances. Escaping may have meant survival, but it was clear his favorability and trustworthiness would take a huge hit—not that Bernhard would stand for him running from a fight anyway.

Thus, Felix resolved to quell the rampaging Böse dämon while his father simply watched on with silent, cold eyes.

## Chapter 21: Böse Dämon

The fight between Felix and his guards and the Böse dämon began with the latter having the advantage. Felix and his guards' attacks dealt almost no damage, and when they did, the demon healed instantly. Meanwhile, a single blow from the Böse dämon was enough to shatter their armor, and all the guards were already injured, having lost legs, one arm, or even both. Even Felix himself was similarly wounded, as one of his arms hung lifelessly from his shoulder.

"Ha!" shouted Felix as he rallied himself and swung his sword. However, the Böse dämon easily blocked him with its strong arms. It scratched at Felix, and while he was able to dodge its claws, a deep gash was still torn into his shoulder. Luckily, Felix's attacks hadn't been for naught; he had bought enough time to evacuate their noble guests.

Now, the only ones left standing were the Böse dämon, Felix, and five of his soldiers—seven had already been defeated, their bodies strewn across the floor. Boris, who had called the Böse dämon, and Gottfried, who had yet to recover from his battle, were still around as well. There was also Mercedes, who simply watched their fight, and her mother, who was left wondering why her daughter had yet to run. Finally, Margaret, Monika, and their mothers remained as well. Margaret's mother had been too feeble to run, and Margaret was unwilling to leave her behind. As for Monika, well... She stood watching Mercedes with great expectation. Trein had come to Mercedes's side as well, having likely concluded this was the safest place to be. He really didn't let anything slip his attention, and he seemed even healthier and plumper than before. Clearly, he was living lavishly with his newfound riches.

All in all, the only ones who remained at the scene were those related to the Grunewalds, with the exception of Trein and the soldiers. Mercedes had a simple reason for staying: to observe the battle. To be exact, she wanted to assess how strong other vampires were by watching Felix fight the Böse dämon, assuming its strength was comparable to what Benkei's had been when

Mercedes fought against him. Until now, she had never been blessed with someone she could compare her strength against. Thus, while she knew she was strong, she wasn't exactly sure *how* strong. By watching Felix's battle, she wanted to judge how much her skills outpaced those of others—in other words, she was using him as a measure of her own strength.

"I have a question, Trein. Do you think Felix is strong?"

"Hm? Well... I'm not too well-versed in battle, but I believe his skills are comparable to the B rank Seekers I hired."

With those words as her basis, Mercedes calculated the difference in strength between her and Felix. As she ran the numbers in her head, the guards by his side gradually decreased until he was facing the Böse dämon alone. Still, Bernhard had yet to come to his aid, leading Mercedes to wonder if he was going to let his heir die right in front of him. Sensing her gaze, he turned to face her. His eyes were cold and emotionless, as if he trusted no one but himself, and she found them extremely unpleasant. It was as if she was staring into a mirror.

Mercedes had inherited the majority of her personality from her previous self, the only difference being that she didn't used to be so cold...or so she thought. At the very least, witnessing a killing spree would have shaken her, but not now. It made her realize her father's blood really did run through her veins.

"Keep it up! Smash that pretentious face of his in!" Boris was elated by the success he was witnessing and began to give orders to the Böse dämon. It froze, turning to him with ire. Then, it rushed toward him, grabbing him by the throat and flinging him into the air. "Gwah...! Wh-What?!"

"Weakling! I will not take orders from some dingbat!"

*Oh, it talks,* Mercedes inwardly noted. She was fed up with Boris. How could he fail to control a monster *he* himself had summoned? The Böse dämon threw him against the wall, knocking him unconscious. Then, it returned its attention to Felix.

"What are you doing?! Hurry and save our Felix!" A new voice suddenly resounded from the entryway. Mercedes turned in its direction to find a peach-haired woman rushing toward Bernhard. She appeared to be in her early

twenties...not that looks were a reliable way of judging a vampire's age. Given how casually she addressed him, she clearly wasn't your average noble.

"This place is dangerous, mother! Please run!" screamed Felix, revealing the woman's identity. She was Felix's mother, and thus Bernhard's legal wife. That was why she had addressed him so casually.

However, that left Mercedes with a question. Felix's hair was blond, Bernhard's blue, and his mother's peach; neither of them shared his hair color, so where exactly had Felix's come from? Was it passed down from one of his grandparents?

*No way, right?* For a moment, Mercedes wondered if Felix was truly Bernhard's child, but she quickly dismissed the thought. It was rude to doubt the fidelity of a woman one had just met, and thus, the only explanation was that Felix's hair color must have come from one of his grandparents.

As such frivolous thoughts went through Mercedes's head, Margaret suddenly tugged on her sleeve. "Hm?"

"Um, big sister? Can you save our big brother...?"

Mercedes was silent. Margaret assuredly didn't have a full grasp of the situation; she hadn't figured out that being used by Felix as a stepping stone in this manner meant it was likely they'd all soon be disowned. Yet, her plea resonated with Mercedes exactly because she was so young and innocent. Mercedes couldn't genuinely wish to save someone without considering what was in it for herself.

Thus, she patted Margaret's head with a smile. "You're a good kid."

Mercedes had no sympathy for those who had failed after taking self-centered action. Whatever the outcome, it was ultimately that individual's responsibility. They could go down in flames, but as long as those embers never made their way to her, she couldn't care less. Even if Felix died right in front of her, it would only leave a slight distaste in her mouth, and with a little time, it would become nothing more than a bygone memory.

However, ignoring an innocent request from a young girl would wound her heart. Thus, she stuck her hands into her coat pockets and nonchalantly

approached the Böse dämon just as Felix grew unable to stand and the Böse dämon was about to land the finishing blow.

“Hey, inky! Can’t you leave it at that? You’ve already won.”

The Böse dämon turned its face, and once it realized the voice belonged to a young girl, it assumed a snide tone. “You’re just a brat. Stand down. Battles are a matter of life or death... They don’t end until one side has perished. It’s a world a girl like you could never understand, so stay out of it. Take those other women and leave. The one over there looks quite sickly. Give her a proper meal and let her rest.”

*Huh? Is this demon actually a good person?* Clearly, it had its own morals and views when it came to battles and had no desire to lay hands on any of the women. She may have been talking to a monster, but it was hard not to like someone who had so much self-respect. Usually, she’d have taken him up on his offer...but right now, Mercedes was acting on her sister’s request. She couldn’t just retreat.

“Nope. You’ll have to use force if you want me to leave.”

“If you think I will refrain from fighting you just because you’re a girl, you’re mistaken, brat.”

“Stop talking and fight me.”

“You fool...”

The blood vessels on the Böse dämon’s forehead protruded as it swung its strong arms down on Mercedes. However, she took her left arm out of her pocket and easily blocked the attack. Cracks shaped like spiderwebs formed in the floor beneath her feet, but the Böse dämon was unable to bring its arm down any farther. No matter how much power it channeled—even enough to have blood vessels popping out of its forehead—its arms wouldn’t budge within the grasp of this young girl’s scrawny hand.

“H-Huh?!”

Mercedes squeezed her left hand down on the Böse dämon’s arm. Unable to withstand the pressure, it buckled as blood spurted out from between Mercedes’s fingers, which she had dug into the Böse dämon’s arm. She then

lifted the Böse dämon into the air and tossed it in the opposite direction of Margaret and the others. It flew through the air, taking furnishings, chairs, and tables with it before finally slamming into the wall. The scene left Felix speechless, as well as his mother, Margaret's, and Monika.

"W-Wow! You're so amazing, big sister!" Margaret, on the other hand, already knew of her sister's strength and only reacted with subtle surprise. She had asked for her sister's help, but seeing how one-sided this victory had been left her once again shocked.

"How wonderful..." remarked Monika, her cheeks tinted red as she pressed her hands against them in ecstasy.

Suddenly, Mercedes could feel something cold run down her back.

"Excellent." There had finally been a shift in Bernhard's expression; the corners of his lips were now raised, yet his praise had been too quiet to reach Mercedes's ears.

As the crowd watched on, Mercedes approached the Böse dämon, hands in her pockets.

"U-Urgh..." it moaned, but Mercedes only looked down at it with cold, emotionless eyes, filling the Böse dämon with an indescribable fear and sense of vulnerability. Still, it stood and immediately launched one of its fists at Mercedes, who quickly switched to counterattacking with magic. She conjured an attractive force on her enemy's fist, simultaneously casting a repulsive force on her own fist in her left pocket, causing it to accelerate. Then, she took that fist out of her pocket, launching it forward in a "Hand Pocket" attack. Pulled by the force field, it went straight for the Böse dämon's fist and slammed into it.

"Agh! A-Again?!"

*Hm, I was thinking of using this as an automatic defense technique, but this might work better than I thought. Only the problem right now is that I can't redirect where a blow will land. It still needs some work,* Mercedes mused as she segued into another "Hand Pocket" attack, this time using her right hand. At the same time, she conjured an attractive field over the Böse dämon's face, setting up for an automatic attack that couldn't miss. The Böse dämon reeled its face backward, but Mercedes's arm followed after it, twisting like a snake in the

air before colliding with the creature. Her arm strength, the attractive force field, and the effect of the “Hand Pocket” ability resulted in a blow that appeared mild but had impact beyond imagination.

Mercedes had yet to officially name this technique of drawing a fist from her pocket, but it left the Böse dämon devoid of consciousness, and its large form sunk to the floor.

## Chapter 22: A Warped Father and Daughter

Mercedes had realized she could cast magic without directing it via her hands or otherwise while she was increasing the gravity acting on her during training. Magic was usually seen as something that came from the hands, and Mercedes had certainly held that notion herself. Influenced by the fiction from her previous life, she naturally and mistakenly believed that magic had to be given a direction.

However, she realized this wasn't the case once she learned to use her own self-made magic. There was no need to outstretch one's hands to activate magic, though of course, doing so made it easier to cast, to concentrate magical power, and to strengthen the spell.

However, if one's sole goal was to cast magic, just looking at—or really, just imagining—a target was enough, and the drawing fist technique Mercedes had used utilized this logic. By conjuring a weak attractive force field in the direction her eyes were pointed, it would suck in her fist, creating an automatic attack that also automatically blocked. Additionally, she could use the “Hand Pocket” technique by casting a repulsive force in her pocket that accelerated her fist and repelled it forward. She had yet to name the technique as it lacked refinement and reliability, but she was certain that it would be a strong tool in her arsenal once it was complete.

After quelling the Böse dämon with this incomplete drawing fist technique, Mercedes decided not to finish off the demon and instead take it away. No matter how she spun it, it seemed impossible that Boris had brought such a monster here without any assistance. She wanted to know more about this seal stone, so she decided that for now, she'd try to wring that intel out of him. Thus, she grabbed the unconscious Böse dämon and walked away, dragging it along with her. Of course, sealing it inside her dungeon would have been the simplest solution, but the crowd of onlookers made that unfeasible.

“W-Wait. Just who...?” Felix tried to stop her, but she passed him without so



much as sparing him a glance. Most likely, his question was, “Just who are you?” but she didn’t know how to answer that. She was simply the daughter of a concubine, Felix’s half sister, and someone who would soon be deprived of the Grunewald name, but Felix knew all of that already.

“Well, I suppose this party’s over. Let’s go, mother.”

“I’d love to, but that fucking bas—I mean, your father—seems to want a word with you.”

Mercedes was done here, and thus, she wanted to return to her manor. However, upon turning around at Lydia’s remark, she found Bernhard approaching. He walked right past Felix without even inspecting his injured son, instead coming to stand right before Mercedes.

“Do you need something, Lord Grunewald?”

Mercedes blatantly addressed her father as if he were a stranger. She wasn’t the daughter of his legal wife, but a concubine, and now, she could leave this city whenever she wished. She had no reservations when it came to abandoning the Grunewald name and being disowned. She had built the necessary foundations, so there was no need to suck up to him either. But most importantly, she had no desire to call him her father after so many years of being neglected.

Thus, she purposefully erected a wall between them. This was the first time she had come face-to-face with her father, and seeing him up close, she couldn’t help but acknowledge the strong resemblance between them: his long blue hair, his menacing features that seemed more fitting for a wild animal, his golden eyes that resembled a starving bird of prey’s. While Mercedes’s facial features had taken more after her mother’s, her hair and eyes were the spitting image of her father, and to those around them, it was clear that the auras they exuded were strikingly similar.

“Mercedes is your name, yes? You fought excellently, my child.”

His words had her scowling. What was he after? Why refer to her as his child only now? No, there was nothing strange about his words. Even if he had virtually abandoned Mercedes, that didn’t mean she wasn’t his child. He had every right to call her that. Still, she found it strange hearing him say those

words so suddenly.

“They say that gems are often found in the most unexpected of places. Despite giving him the best lineage and best education, I’ve grown fed up with Felix’s inadequacy. I believed there was need for me to bear more children and wait for one suitable to be my heir, but I see my lack of faith in the children of my concubines was unfounded. I should have noticed sooner that the child I sought was here all along.”

His words were clearly...strange. It sounded as if he didn’t accept any of his other children, as if *Mercedes* was the only one he viewed as his own. It was as if he was saying all his other children, including Felix, were completely out of the picture. There was something that seemed *off*.

“I believe Felix, my elder brother, is your heir. If you have the time to talk to me, it would be better spent worrying about him.”

“Felix is no brother of yours. If he was your sibling—if he was my child—he would not disappoint me so. His blood is too weak to be considered my son.”

Bernhard flashed both Felix and Boris a glare of disdain. The look in his eyes was not that of a father gazing at his child, and it was enough to convince Mercedes that he lacked feelings for even his legal wife. “Those who cannot succeed are not my children. Those who disappoint me do not share my blood.” That was what he was saying, and the warped nature of his words left Mercedes and the rest of the crowd speechless.

He continued. “I take great honor in my bloodline and always believed that a woman of noble blood could bear me a child who was thick with my own. Yet, shockingly, the child she bore took little after me. No matter how much money I invested into him or what education I blessed him with, he never approached my level. It was disappointing. I believed there was a need to choose a new surrogate for my children and start afresh.”

*How can he say all that in front of his wife and son?* Mercedes took some displeasure at her father’s inability to mince his words. Felix and his mother were complete strangers to her, and she wasn’t so much of a saint as to take offense from someone speaking ill of others. She would feel nothing overhearing a stranger on the street showering another stranger with verbal

abuse, for example. At the very most, she'd just think "that's harsh" or "sucks for him." It was impossible for her to be moved to anger or pity. Those able to cry or feel rage for the sake of a stranger were certainly good people, but Mercedes wasn't one of them. Still, even she couldn't help but pity Felix and his mother after hearing Bernhard speak of them that way.

"Yet, I found what I sought at this useless party: a person rife with my blood and the same as myself. Oh, how happy I am! So this is the joy fathers must feel. We have finally met, my child."

"Do you have no love for your wife and son even after all the time you've spent together?"

"What an odd question. Why ask me about something you yourself cannot understand?"

His question had Mercedes holding back her breath. He had hit the nail on the head, and it left her bereft of a rebuttal. She herself had never known love; of course, she knew *what* it was, but she had never experienced such a thing for herself. Even in her past life—and even more so since her rebirth—she lacked a heart.

Yes, she was grateful to her mother for bringing her into this world and felt indebted to her for raising her. She felt a responsibility to give her a better life. Yet, she never felt love for her mother. She was thankful to Nan for looking after her and wanted to repay that debt, but she felt no love for the woman. She thought Margaret was cute, and as her elder sister, she wanted the best for her and for her to be happy. Thus, she offered her aid to get the girl standing on her own, but that was only because abandoning her would leave a bad taste in her mouth. She helped the girl because she didn't want to become the type of devil who would turn their back on their own sister; she offered her assistance pretending to have feelings because she didn't want to believe she lacked them.

In reality, Mercedes knew nothing of love and compassion. Even in her past life, she'd been different from others. She never found anything that meant something to her, nor anything she enjoyed from the bottom of her heart. That didn't mean she had no fun in life, of course. At some level, she was able to feel joy, and she knew it was important to enjoy such pleasures to keep her soul

healthy and happy. Still, compared to others, she experienced little enjoyment, and that was the exact reason she prioritized future benefit over fun. It wasn't that she had the skills to work hard, it was that she lacked the skills to enjoy *anything*. Mercedes Grunewald had lacked something crucial since birth—no, even before that. Her heart was that of a warped moon which would never wax in full.

“You and I are the same. We are the strong, those who lack what define the weak like ill-defined emotions. I knew as soon as I looked into your eyes that I had met someone who shared a heart like mine for the first time in my life.”

Mercedes was silent, but secretly, she agreed with him. When she had first seen Bernhard, she'd felt as if she were looking into a mirror. Her instincts told her that she was cut from the same cloth as this man. As much as she wanted to deny it, they not only looked similar but shared the same blood. She and Bernhard were undeniably father and daughter.

“From now on, let us live here together. You are the only heir I could ever acknowledge, my child.”

“And you think I'll just go along with this sudden flip-flopping? It's odd you don't think a child you've abandoned until now would resist you.”

“As I said, you and I are one and the same. You don't wish to resist me, deep down. You're simply pretending to. You've never sought love from your parents, so you can't be angry at me for not giving it to you. I am certain you will accept my offer, as you decide your actions simply out of cost and gain. You don't calculate emotions into your decisions, and ultimately, you will choose what benefits you the most.”

Again, he was exactly right. She held no contempt for her father. Since she'd never sought love from her parents, she simply viewed him as nothing more than a stranger, holding neither ire nor distaste for the man. As he'd said, what Mercedes considered were the cost and gains of accepting or declining his offer. When weighed against each other, it was clear that it would be much more beneficial to obediently follow her father and use him rather than limit herself by resisting him and running.

She could utilize the Grunewald name. With it, she'd gain a proper education,

training, and a better ability to build a foundation for her future. She'd gain access to books and knowledge reserved for nobles. Yes, she did pity her mother for having her life ruined by this man; "that really sucks," she would think. She wanted to get back at him for it, and her wish to escape her poverty was genuine. She knew that Margaret and her other siblings were all fellow victims of her father, and yet, she could feel no anger. What would be the benefit? Wouldn't it be stupid to lose herself in temporary emotions, thus relinquishing her advantage and gaining nothing in a situation where she could gain something?

Instead, she'd think about what happened next and move in the direction that would most benefit her. There could be no flaws in her thinking; in fact, it should be the correct approach. Her judgment was sound, and it would lead to the best outcome for her. Rather than making unnecessary enemies, she'd use this man, taking him up on his offer and using it to improve the lives of her mother and sister. *That* was the correct approach. It *had* to be.

"Indeed. You're correct, father. I truly am your daughter, and our line of thinking is much more similar than I'd like to admit. I had planned on leaving this city as soon as I could, but...I am still young. Biding my time here briefly to train myself further will ultimately lead to a better future for me. You truly are my saving grace. I'll be using you, father."

Besides Bernhard, all were taken aback by her words. Her tone was polite, but she had completely put a stop to all pretenses and boldly proclaimed she'd be *using* her father. Still, Bernhard looked completely unperturbed by her declaration. Instead, his delight only seemed to grow.

"You truly are my daughter."

The warped daughter took her warped father's hand. Neither had love for the other—not even a shred. Yes, they were heartlessly in alignment. Watching this odd scene unfold before him, Felix had a single deep-rooted thought: *These two aren't normal.*



## Chapter 23: Once the Chaos Ends

After meeting her father Bernhard, Mercedes's life completely changed. She moved out of her old house and into the Grunewalds' main manor, where she was provided her own room.

Her goal in coming here was to fill the gaps in her knowledge. Self-study could only teach her so much, which was why she wished to build a proper foundation in magic, martial arts, and other applicable fields. Somehow, her senses had led her down the right path in her studies, but there was no guarantee that would continue. Additionally, she would one day leave this city, and what lay beyond it was a complete mystery to her. In her current state, she'd probably be able to manage one way or another if she left. There were dungeons out there, and she had her trusty advisor Zwölf as well. But still, she had no way of knowing what she was ignorant of.

While it would perhaps be easy for Mercedes to leave on her own, she had others like Nan and Margaret to worry about. She didn't think those two could withstand a long journey, and Margaret's mother would undoubtedly have to quit partway through. At the same time, there was no telling what Bernhard would do if she left them behind, so she decided it was better to fall under his auspices, gain his protection, force a compromise, and wring out everything she could from the man.

They wouldn't be allies, but as long as they had use for one another, they wouldn't be enemies either. Mercedes and Bernhard had similar personalities, so she was confident they shared that thinking. Of course, Bernhard saw through her plot. He knew she was attempting to use him, but that presented him with even greater benefits; he'd use her all the while simultaneously being used himself.

Mercedes knew Bernhard would raise her as he desired, but since she knew that would present her with the greatest benefits, she'd use her own father. At the same time, her father would raise her with full knowledge that she was

doing so. Much to her chagrin, their interests were aligned, and on the surface, it looked as if their relationship were an amicable one. However, Mercedes ultimately planned to leave, making her scheme one of premeditated betrayal. She'd let Bernhard put a collar on her, but once all the pieces aligned and she no longer had use for him, she'd toss both the collar and her father aside.

Mercedes had come to her father with the intention of discarding him, but Bernhard knew that. What drove him to accept her regardless was his confidence that he'd be able to prevent her from doing so once that day came. He'd force her to yield and foist the Grunewald name on her. Thus, he could overlook his daughter's rebelliousness.

Even if she surpassed him and he failed, he couldn't ask for anything better. It would mean the dawn of the perfect heir he had been searching for, and while she could remove the Grunewald name, she could not remove his blood. His genes would survive in a form even greater than his. Therefore, he eagerly accepted her eventual challenge. *Best me if you can!*

Thus, their alliance was predicated on its eventual dissolution. The daughter approached her father with a knife in hand and declared she would one day betray him, and in response, the father embraced his daughter with the promise he'd wrestle that knife away from her. No matter how you spun it, they weren't normal; they undeniably lacked some humanity. Yet, these two twisted individuals had so easily read each other's hands that on the surface, their past friction seemed like nothing to them.

As a condition of her relocation to the main residence, Mercedes demanded that her mother and the other children of the concubines receive better treatment, and that her siblings be provided for until they were able to provide for themselves. Surprisingly, Bernhard readily accepted, allowing Margaret's living conditions to greatly improve and her mother to gradually recover...though really, the latter of these was thanks to the Böse dämon who now worked under Mercedes.

The Böse dämon himself wasn't malicious; he had just been used. Therefore, once Mercedes had bested him in battle, she made use of her right as the victor to recruit him under her banner. Then, she sent him to Margaret's house to act as their guard, but oddly enough, the demon turned out to be an excellent chef,



and the meals he prepared for the two had resulted in improvements to the mother's health—not that Mercedes had any idea why a Böse dämon would have such a skill.

With her daughter invited to the main manor, Lydia decided to likewise barge in as well, taking their nan with her as well. They had been afforded the room adjacent to Mercedes's, and Lydia occasionally bothered Bernhard with some lavish requests—she was a woman of consistent personality. Boris, meanwhile, had disappeared, though Mercedes had no idea where to.

All of these improvements were the result of Bernhard finding value in Mercedes, meaning there was a chance he'd annul their agreement the moment he began to think otherwise. They hadn't made a blood pact, so she couldn't let her guard down. In any case, these demands meant that her siblings were indebted to her, making it unlikely that they would turn against her.

The main manor of the Grunewalds was spacious. When including the gardens, its area was even greater than that of Tokyo Dome. Translated into the Japanese measurement of tsubo, it was about fifteen thousand large, or roughly fifty thousand meters. For reference, a thousand tsubo was the cutoff for a house to be considered a mansion in Japan, though there might not be much use in comparing this world to a densely populated nation which struggled to find the space for its buildings.

In any case, it was big—*pointlessly* big. It had a detached annex, a library, and even a bathhouse, which Mercedes was particularly thankful for. While this world did have baths, those used by commoners were all mixed gender and dens of depravity full of eating, drinking, dancing, singing, and even prostitution. Bodily cleansing had been muddled together with bodily pleasure, and there was no way she would visit such an establishment. That was why she'd taken to cleaning herself in mountain springs, which were so cold in the winter that she feared she might freeze to death. Upon obtaining her dungeon, she had even contemplated constructing a bathhouse inside—*that* was how important they were to her.

The library was spacious as well and had so many books Mercedes thought she would never be able to read every single one even with all the time in the world.

The biggest boon, however, was that she would be enrolled in an academy where she could learn magic and martial arts. Schools in this world were elite institutions that could only be attended by nobles and a small subsection of the rich; thus the majority of people had no choice but to study these things on their own. While Mercedes had already taught herself how to read, write, and do magic, there was no harm in using this opportunity to build a proper foundation in those skills.

Additionally, coming to the manor had given her access to new information, allowing her to make two realizations. First, this world was almost always engulfed in war. Considering how common armed conflict was even during the Middle Ages on Earth, there wasn't anything strange about that; even Japan was constantly fighting among itself until the Tokugawa shogunate came to power. Until now, Mercedes had simply been calling her nation "a country of vampires," but she was wrong. Properly, her land was named Orcus, and it was a large nation of vampires located in the West. Additionally, the largest city in all of Orcus was Blut. It surpassed even the size of the capital, and the Grunewalds governed it as well as a large portion of the surrounding land.

However, Orcus wasn't *the* country of vampires, but just one of multiple located on the continent of Tyrrhena, all of which were antagonistic to one another. There was nothing strange about this either; in the Warring States era, "countries" like Owari and Echigo existed even on the small islands of Japan. The formation of multiple nations on a landmass as wide as Tyrrhena was inevitable, and apparently, these nations waged war against each other for land and resources. Blut was currently at peace, but Mercedes knew that this hadn't always been the case.

Second, she learned that Bernhard was not as heartless as she had surmised. Originally, she'd thought that her mother had been afforded a poor life, not befitting for a noble—which was true considering they hadn't been allowed to live at the main manor. However, once she came to learn how many in this world lived, she realized that her situation hadn't been so bad. Blut was a large city where even commoners could be wealthy, but this place wasn't the standard. The majority of Bernhard's fiefdom consisted of poor villages and small towns that relied on farming, and their standard of living was so poor it

couldn't even be compared to that of Blut's. This made sense—nobles could only be nobles if they had people to exploit. If everyone was rich, there would be no nobles.

These destitute vampires were weak, powerless, and known as “Thinbloods” on account of their blood being metaphorically weak and thinned out. They lived lives of daily struggle, and when unable to obtain blood to drink, they had to stave off hunger by eating the only thing they could: potatoes. “Vampires that eat only potatoes,” now *that's* a phrase that could ruin some dreams.

Vampires in this world were far from immortal, and unlike in the manga Mercedes would read in her old world, there were no vampires who could regenerate and come back just fine after being shredded to pieces. They'd die if they were beheaded, and even if they got stabbed through the heart with something other than a wooden stake or a weapon made of silver. They could die of thirst, hunger, heat stroke, and hypothermia. In this world, vampires were simply a species with slightly elongated lifespans, a strong life force, enhanced physical abilities, and the power to regenerate.

From that perspective, Mercedes's life in a small mansion with the guarantee of food, clothing, and shelter without work fulfilled the basics. Of course, Bernhard could have provided them with a more lavish lifestyle given his wealth, so it was clear that he *did* treat them poorly, but this information had given Mercedes a slightly better impression of him. Now, her opinion was that he was a heartless man who nevertheless carried out the basic aspects of his duties. But that was exactly what made him so easy to use. Once again, Mercedes recognized his worth as a tool.

# The Lonely Girl Paints a Portrait of Family

Margaret Grunewald was born to the concubine of a nobleman. That nobleman was none other than Duke Bernhard Grunewald, a powerful man who ruled the lands she resided in. Since she was the daughter of a duke, one might assume that she lived a life of luxury, but unfortunately, that wasn't the case. Margaret's mother was but a concubine—one of low status at that. Thus, the life afforded to them wasn't a good one.

In this world, children of nobles were often given a small gift of severance money and abandoned if they failed to become heir. Because she was the daughter of an ousted concubine, Margaret's father had little regard for her. While he may have been able to use her in political marriage, the Grunewalds currently had no one who they'd go to such lengths to curry favor with. Thus, Margaret and her mother were cast aside as undesirables and forced to live in a faraway manor with minimal servants.

The floorboards creaked with each step, and their daily meals consisted of nothing but stale bread, boiled potatoes, and a thin soup made from scraps of meat and vegetables—meals not befitting of nobles one bit. But that life in the manor was Margaret's whole world.

"I'm sorry, Margaret. If only mommy could work..." apologized Margaret's mother. Her body was too weak for labor, which meant they had no way to make additional money and no way of escaping their destitute circumstances.

Margaret's sole solace was the existence of her elder siblings. They had never met, but she knew they were out there, as her mother had informed her as much. Every day, she would daydream about her brothers and sisters and draw pictures of them all living together in harmony. What were her brothers like? What were her sisters like? Near her house, she would take a stick and draw their faces in the dirt over and over, and each time, they would be different. Margaret, her mother, and their two servants always looked the same, but her siblings had no defined features—which was only natural, as she had never met

them. She had no idea what their faces looked like or how their bodies were built.

However, one day, Margaret was blessed with the opportunity to meet these siblings. She had been drawing in the dirt as usual when a shadow suddenly appeared above her. The voice that rang out was strong and forceful. “Hey. Are you Margaret Grunewald?”

Those sudden, rough words caused her to jump. She timidly cast her gaze upward and found a ginger stranger looking down on her. Beside him was a boy built like a tree and a girl with golden ringlets.

“Y-Yes. Who are you...?”

“We’re Grunewalds, just like you.”

Those words brought the light back to Margaret’s face. They were Grunewalds—in other words, family. She had only met them in her imagination, but now, they were standing in front of her. However, her brother’s words were far from what she had been expecting.

“They’re holding a birthday party for Felix Grunewald, the son of the legal wife, a month from now in the main manor. Help me beat him to a pulp.”

It was a request for cooperation—a demand, rather. Margaret had no idea what he was talking about, but her elder brother elaborated further. Apparently, Felix would be inviting his siblings to his next birthday party in order to kick them down, embarrassing them all in front of a large crowd via a test of strength. However, if they could turn the tables against him, it would be their chance to stand in the limelight and steal the title of heir from him. Strength reigned supreme in vampire society, but it would be impossible for the uneducated children of concubines to win against the well-educated son of the legal wife. Thus, Margaret’s job was to hit Felix with a surprise blow dart.

Basically, the boy before her was foisting all the danger on her and taking all the spoils for himself. If this “plan” of theirs succeeded, Boris would claim glory as victor over Felix while Margaret would gain nothing, and if they were caught, Margaret would be captured as the perpetrator while Boris could just play dumb. He had only come to her to recruit her as a pawn.

“B-But...that’s not a good thing to do...”

“Huh?!”

Margaret didn’t know what Boris was after, but she knew that achieving victory via surprise attack wasn’t right. That was why she timidly expressed her dislike of the plan, but...

“Shut up and do as I say,” growled Boris in a low voice as he punched a nearby tree. It shook wildly, and his fist left a mark behind. He was threatening her, saying that if she refused, it would be her face next time.

Margaret could only gasp.

“Do it, you hear? But relax. If I become heir to House Grunewald, I’ll make sure there’s something in it for you. You want a better life for your mom, right?”

“Y-Yes...” Margaret’s fear of violence and her wish for a good life for her mother forced her to nod obediently.

Seeing this, Boris spat, “You should’ve just said that in the first place,” and stomped on the drawing in the ground Margaret had worked so hard on.

“Ah...”

“Huh? What’s this? Why are you drawing weird crap on the ground?”

Boris must have just noticed the drawing. It depicted the family Margaret had always longed for, but unlike the boy she daydreamed of, the one she’d met today was a scumbag. This fact had plunged her into despair. But that was when the girl with golden ringlets—her elder sister, Monika Grunewald—spoke to her. Unlike Margaret, she wore the proper lavish attire of nobles, and a single glance was enough for Margaret to know they had lived drastically different lives. Even once her two brothers (Boris and...the other bigger one whose name she didn’t know) had left, Monika stayed behind. Watching Margaret on the verge of tears over her smudged drawing, Monika scolded her.

“Hey. Don’t just do as you’re told; that’s pathetic. Talk back a little! Listen. Strength decides everything for us vampires. You need to learn that the more people look down on you, the more they crush you.”

“B-But...”

“You’ll end up a loser if you don’t change! You’re a noble, so act like one and speak up! You can’t just mope around on the ground. It’s pathetic!”

Monika’s words were harsh, but they were true. Vampires were nothing more than barbarians masquerading as the civilized. No matter how high and mighty they may have acted, their belief in strength ultimately trumped all. Thus, the strong were charismatic and naturally rose to the top while the weak fell to the bottom. Once others began to think you were weak, your position in society was done for. Thus, while Monika’s words were cruel, they were right on the money. She was worried about Margaret.

Still, just because words were right didn’t mean they were effective, especially when they were so stern they caused the other party to become defensive. But unfortunately, Margaret couldn’t even manage that much. Monika watched as the young girl bawled her eyes out, realizing she had been wrong in her approach. With a guilty look, she took something out of her pocket and presented it to Margaret.

“Here, take it. Seriously... You’re making me look like a bully.” The item she held was a black bar wrapped in paper. Margaret watched dumbfounded as Monika broke the bar in half and popped the larger piece in her mouth. Apparently, it was food. “It’s called chocolate, and it’s been quite popular in town recently. Only the rich can get their hands on it, but I’ll allow you a piece.”

Margaret timidly reached for the candy and looked at Monika, who vigorously nodded as if trying to prompt her to eat it. Making her resolve, Margaret took a bit of the black bar, causing both bitterness and a sweetness she had never tasted before to spread across her tongue.

“Wow! What is this stuff...?” Margaret had been apprehensive at first, but once she tasted its sweetness, she gobbled it up on impulse. She was barely a noble, but she had never had any sweets afforded exclusively to that class. The only sweetness she had ever tasted was the occasional fruit, and to her, this chocolate was the finest delicacy she had ever experienced.

“Listen, uh... Margaret, you said your name was? Strength is everything to us vampires, so grow strong...strong enough that you won’t be a pawn to

scumbags like them.”

With those rough words of motivation, Monika turned around and elegantly walked off into the distance. As Margaret watched her leave, she felt the weight over her heart being slightly lifted.

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However, despite Monika’s demands, it was impossible to become strong overnight. The day after the encounter, Boris brought Margaret to a small manor. It was the home of another Grunewald sibling, and according to Boris, she was just as poor and low status as Margaret. Most likely, Boris was trying to drag her into this and assign her some dirty work as well. Once Margaret realized this, she was overcome with sympathy for her elder sister who was still yet a stranger.

However, those feelings dissipated the moment they met. She was completely different from Margaret. Despite the similarity of their plights, this girl conducted herself with confidence and wore the marvelous equipment of a Seeker. She had a six-armed giant and a huge wolf in tow behind her and seemed utterly unafraid of Boris. She took no interest in his plan and easily flung him aside, and when he went to threaten her, she instead shut him up by showing him how it was *really* done.

Her name was Mercedes Grunewald, and despite the fact that she’d grown up under similar circumstances as Margaret, she had the strength to move forward without letting it ruin her. Looking at her, Margaret felt as if she’d discovered the true meaning of strength. From Mercedes’s perspective, they were all just weaklings who could accomplish nothing on their own—no, they were rubbish who couldn’t even accomplish anything as a group. Thus, Boris’s display of violence hadn’t even angered her, as in her eyes, he was nothing but a worm not worth such emotion. Margaret and Mercedes were born into the same circumstances, but Mercedes was completely different. Margaret viewed her with envy, but that was when their eyes met, and Mercedes grabbed her by the hand.

“Come here.”

Margaret was forced to follow, but after, Mercedes taught her all sorts of



things. She learned that Boris was bound to fail and that she needed to cut ties with him, and she learned that she needed to find a way to make money on her own if she didn't want to be abused by people like him. She learned that the drawing she'd gotten so good at could earn her money, and that learning to read and write would help her make a living too. From then on, Margaret accompanied Mercedes into dungeons to draw pictures of the monsters and was taught to read and write, slowly improving her circumstances. Then, a month later when Mercedes had earned her place in the main residence through her display of strength at Felix's birthday party, she allowed Margaret and the others to live there as well.

Monika had been right. The strong rise to the top, and Mercedes would surely continue to rise even higher. Margaret could do nothing but watch from the sidelines, but she wanted to continue that. She wanted to capture in her pictures just how much her beloved sister had toiled and grown, since she knew it was a task only she could accomplish.

Even now, Margaret continues to draw her pictures. Unlike the ones she scribbled on the ground before, these ones are portraits of her family drawn on parchment. Margaret and her mom are there, as well as Monika and her big brothers Gottfried and Felix. And while he's a bit scary, her father Bernhard is there too. Right in the middle is Mercedes.

These are real pictures of her family, completely unlike the ones of her imagination she used to fill in the gaps in her heart, and every time she looks at them, she can't help but grin in satisfaction.

Additionally, being as unimportant as he is, Boris is not in those pictures. Margaret's only impression of him is as someone who's scary, and thus, she no longer remembers his face. It's a fact both utterly un concerning and completely natural.

# The Duke's Daughter's Societal Debut

“While my son is still young and naive, he’s proven his mettle in governing fiefdoms and has won the trust of our citizens. What do you think, Your Grace? I would appreciate it if you could...”

They were currently in the drawing room of the Grunewald residence. Mercedes sat on an uncomfortable sofa while listening to a noble sitting opposite her. Next to her was her father Bernhard, whom this noble was desperately trying to convince of his son’s greatness.

Mercedes watched the scene while stifling sighs. There was one thing that she had experienced more of once she had moved into the Grunewald manor: marriage proposals. She may have only been ten, but such talks weren’t rare at her age in this world; some were married as soon as they were born. As awful as it may sound, children of nobles were political tools. It was just the way of the world to marry off your newborn child or to have your young child married to a senior who didn’t have much time left. All families did it.

Thus, there was nothing strange about the constant proposals brought to Mercedes given that she had the blood of the Grunewalds running through her veins. Her father was a duke, and his influence and authority rivaled that of the king himself. That title was the highest court rank possible and existed only so that someone as strong as the king could be sheltered among nobles. There were no drawbacks in having a relationship with such a man, and consequently, nobles flocked to Mercedes like ants to a sugar cube. Of course, the same could be said for Margaret, Monika, and even her elder brother Gott...something or other.

The noble before them was making such a proposal, and the son in question sat politely beside him. If talks went well, this boy—or rather man, given that he appeared to have surpassed his twenties—would be her husband. It was impossible to judge the age of vampires based on looks, but at the very least, this man had to be older.

Sensing Mercedes's eyes, the son grinned at her. He was probably trying to appear charming, but he was unable to conceal his lust. Mercedes was completely put off. *Ugh. He's a lolicon.*

For the sake of this poor man's honor, it must be noted that lolicons weren't rare among vampires. Since they had perpetual ages, there were plenty of adult women who appeared as children, and of course, there were plenty of men who married them. Quite unfortunately, the notion that being a lolicon was something shameful was not a concept that vampires had. Lusting after young girls was perfectly normal for them—they were quite a terrible species indeed.

"Mercedes. What are your thoughts on the matter?"

"I refuse, obviously."

"You heard her. May I ask you to take your leave?"

Bernhard had only asked her for show, so Mercedes easily turned down the proposal. That was just the kind of man he was, after all. He had turned things over to her knowing she'd refuse, and even had she agreed, he'd probably have just refused the proposal himself. He wasn't the type to have qualms about using his children as tools for political gain, but he'd make sure he got all the use out of them he could. At the very least, he wouldn't waste one of his limited trump cards on a worthless no-name noble.

The man grumbled for a bit, but Bernhard had grown tired of speaking with him, and he eventually succeeded in pushing the man to begrudgingly leave. Once they were alone, Mercedes rebuked him. "Are you punishing me?"

Rather than asking a genuine question, she was more just trying to confirm her suspicions. Bernhard would've had countless chances to turn down this proposal without needing to specifically invite him inside; it wasn't like that noble had come without making an appointment. First, he had sent a letter, and he'd only brought up talks of marriage once Bernhard had responded. However, Bernhard must have known that Mercedes would refuse, and he himself almost certainly planned to do the same considering he had turned down all proposals brought to Margaret and Monika thus far. It was only natural that Mercedes would question why he had agreed to such talks and conclude it was meant to irritate her.

“I am teaching you the ways of the world. As a noble, you will have countless opportunities to interact with those who approach you for similar reasons. I simply am giving you the chance to observe such trash now rather than later.”

“...Thanks.”

To Bernhard, that noble and his son were nothing but an insect raising kit he bestowed on his daughter. Once she entered high society, she'd have to deal with ants flocking to her power whether she liked it or not. Thus, he gave her the chance to observe them now. Mercedes understood this, but there likely wasn't a daughter out there who'd find glee at her father thrusting ants on her and demanding she observe them.

Thinking that his “help” had been uncalled for, Mercedes reached for the door handle, but that was when she noticed a pile of letters sitting on the table. “What are those letters?”

“Just some trash.”

Apparently, Bernhard had no use for them. Still, describing them as “trash” didn't help Mercedes figure out what they actually were. Bernhard most likely spoke those words from the heart, but they only made her more curious. Thus, she headed for the table, picked up one of the letters without his permission, tore it open, and read what was inside.

It was just...a marriage proposal. It was for Monika, and out of the three sisters, she was the one who received the most proposals. Her lineage was probably why; while Mercedes and Margaret were Bernhard's daughters, their mothers were mere commoners. On the other hand, Monika's mother was a noble, albeit a low-ranking one. They may have all been the daughters of concubines, but there was a big gap between Monika and her sisters.

As for the text of the letter itself...horrible was the only way to describe it. The sender rambled about how great his son was and how much the Grunewalds would benefit by taking him in as a son-in-law. Meanwhile, despite Monika being the subject of the letter, he made no mention of her at all. All the words simply boasted of the son's magnificence. It was clear that the vampire who wrote this letter thought nothing of Monika and saw her solely as fodder to bring his son to even greater heights. Apparently, the letter had been written

by a “Viscount Opitz.”

“I see. It is trash,” spat Mercedes as she tossed the letter onto the table. The parchment itself was of fine quality, and she couldn’t help but lament that it had been put to waste.

“He is a man who does not know his place. His family were rural nobles until just a few generations prior, but they saw a rapid rise in influence in recent years after sucking up to a stronger family, and now, they hold the title of viscount. I am sure he wishes to marry his son to one of you three and become my heir should the chance arise.”

“Is it really so easy to rise through the ranks?”

“It depends on the circumstances. For example, if someone were to marry the second daughter of a noble and all her elder siblings died, it would be possible for the girl’s husband to become heir.”

Mercedes couldn’t help but think that such men seemed like parasites. Bernhard had spoken as if it were hypothetical, but there was no way that was the case; within his words was the implication that the sender of this letter had climbed the ranks using that very method. It was safe to assume that he’d had a hand in assassinations or similar crimes.

Still, the Grunewalds were no strangers to climbing the ranks themselves. After moving into their manor, Mercedes discovered that the Grunewalds had been barons until her grandfather’s generation. Thanks to Bernhard’s great feats in a war eighty years prior, they had been afforded the title of duke. Mercedes found it strange that this would be enough to ascend so drastically through the ranks, but...well, she assumed there had to be a bit more to the story, something that would convince the king to see value in maintaining Bernhard’s loyalty to Orcus even for that price.

In any case, the Grunewalds were a family who had risen to eminence in recent years, and there were nobles who secretly looked down on them because of that. Case in point was the fact that Bernhard was addressed as “lord” outside his manor. As duke, the proper term was “Duke Grunewald” or “Your Grace,” just as the noble from earlier had called him, and the title of “Lord” only applied to those with ranks between marquesses and barons. In

Japanese terms, it was the equivalent of appending “san” to someone’s name when “sama” was appropriate. Of course, no one addressed Bernhard incorrectly to his face, but “Lord Bernhard” had become the fixed name for him elsewhere. This was due to the nation’s deep-seated envy for nobles who rapidly climbed the ranks. Other nobles hated to admit that someone who had been below them now stood above them. Sudden success often led to sudden enemies.

The person who wrote this letter most likely secretly despised Bernhard as well.

“And you’re saying this parasite has chosen us as his next hosts?”

“Exactly.”

He probably assumed that as fellow nobles who had ascended the ranks, they’d be easy to take advantage of. At that thought, Bernhard couldn’t help but twist the corners of his lips in dissatisfaction.

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Mercedes learned many things upon moving into the main residence of the Grunewalds, but being officially recognized as Bernhard’s daughter brought with it something else as well: the duties that came with being a member of nobility. She and her mother had been neglected before and weren’t viewed as members of high society, so they bore none of the responsibilities that entailed. But now, her newfound recognition had made her a member of noble society whether she wanted to be or not, and of course, certain responsibilities came with that—studying proper manners and dance.

The daughters of nobility usually made their debut in high society when they had reached their late teens, which was around the age of sixteen in this country. There, one would trade information, exchange names, sell themselves, and search for an eventual spouse. The greatest responsibility any noblewoman had was to bear children, and of course, the more powerful the child’s father, the better. In order to charm those mates, one needed beauty and tact, which was why noble ladies were always focusing on self-improvement in order to attract men.

As for Mercedes...she obviously had no interest in such things. In both this life

and her last, she never felt love or affection for another; she wholly lacked the ability to understand such emotions. If she married, she'd be a cold wife who showed her husband no affection, and even in the event that she had children, she knew she'd be the sort of loveless parent Bernhard was. Therefore, she believed it better for people like her to avoid tying themselves to anyone and instead spend their lives alone.

Regardless of Mercedes's feelings on the matter, though, she was a noble, so she had to have manners and dance beaten into her. Of course, dancing meant wearing a dress, so servants of the Grunewald family had brought her to visit the best tailor in the city. Given that Bernhard was a duke, he could have easily summoned them to his residence, but he likely thought too lowly of the profession to want one visiting his doorstep.

"I'm certainly wearing clothes, I guess..." Mercedes commented as she examined herself in the mirror. She wasn't dressed in her usual attire, instead wearing a frilly, blue dress. It was covered in white lace, and the skirt was so long it reached the floor. Because it was sleeveless, her shoulders were exposed, but white lace covered everything from her upper arms to her fingertips. Her neck was adorned with a choker, and her hair was tied up in an elegant bun and not lazily tied behind her back like usual. She wore earrings made of jewels that, while dainty, were clearly costly, flaunting the Grunewalds' wealth.

*I look so weird in this*, Mercedes couldn't help but think. Quite honestly, she could only laugh at the idea of dancing in such a dress. For one, it was incredibly hard to move around in, and she couldn't help but question whether the dress was actually made with the ballroom in mind. No matter how she spun it, she couldn't see the frills as anything but a hindrance. Not to mention, noble ladies typically made their societal debut at the age of sixteen. Mercedes wouldn't fit in this dress at that age...assuming she hadn't already reached her perpetual age. In other words, the Grunewalds were paying a pretty penny for this lavish dress only to be used for dance *practice*. What a waste.

"You look wonderful, Mercedes."

"Yeah! You look so pretty!"

Mercedes had been scowling at her reflection in the mirror, but upon hearing such flattery from her sisters, she averted her eyes. The two of them were dressed up as well, and their outfits suited them perfectly. Margaret wore a pink dress while Monika's was red, but both accentuated the girls' best features. Mercedes couldn't help but feel that they were worlds apart from her in terms of looks. Monika especially had always been a member of noble society, and thus she was used to such clothing. Unlike Mercedes, she didn't appear to be dressing "up" at all. Monika had told Mercedes she looked wonderful, but coming from a girl who was so clearly used to such opulent clothing, she couldn't help but hear it as "you look wonderful (lol)."

"You look excellent, my lady. I'm certain that you'll attract many gazes once you enter high society. I do hope you'll visit our store again when that time comes." The tailor offered Mercedes some obsequious praise. Nobles nearing their debut were important customers for those in the clothing business. Their vanity and conceit led them to make no monetary concessions when purchasing dresses, and if the girl wearing it drew attention, it would naturally cause new customers to flock to their store. A daughter of a duke *always* drew attention, so the tailor had run some quick calculations and instantly decided that selling a dress to Mercedes—even if at a loss—would bring future profit.

"This dress is intricately woven with the precious fibers of sternenhaufen cocoons. It's silky to the touch and glitters like twinkling stars. The price is five hundred thousand yerks...but if you buy three, I'll give you a thirty percent discount and throw in a bonus! Instead of 1.5 million yerks, I'll give them to you for a million!"

Basically, the tailor was offering one dress for free. Their business senses were telling them that they needed to sell these dresses, even if it meant an immediate loss. If the duke's daughters fancied the outfits, thanked the shop, and wore them at their debuts...*and* stood out on top of that, the tailor would be able to make up the lost profit in no time at all.

Mercedes had deduced the tailor's logic and was genuinely impressed at their dedication to business.

"Sure, works for me."



She was clueless when it came to fashion, so she decided to follow the tailor's recommendation and purchase the one she had on. The tailor was trying to catch the attention of other nobles and gain them as customers, so it was safe to assume they wouldn't sell Mercedes any bad wares. Thus, she decided to leave it to the pro. The money was Bernhard's anyway. It wouldn't create a hole in her wallet, not even a dent.

"Well then, I'll need to make some adjustments, so I'll have you return it for a spell. With just seven days to fix this up, I'm confident I will deliver a product that will satisfy you."

"Seven days, you said? Got it."

The tailor would adjust the dresses for the three girls over the week, and once that was done, a servant of the Grunewalds would visit the shop to pay for and pick up the dresses. There was nothing left for Mercedes to do but return home and report the price of the gowns and when they could be retrieved. She quickly headed for the changing room to get out of the stifling dress and back into her usual attire.

While this was a "changing room," it wasn't the sort of stall found in department stores. The room was quite spacious, and three of her family's servants had entered among them without a second thought. Their job was to assist Mercedes in getting dressed...or rather, dress her entirely. For nobles, the act of changing clothes was generally left to their servants and not something they did themselves. Mercedes didn't need any help with this, but if she said that, the girls would lose their purpose and ultimately be fired. Thus, she resigned herself to silence, though she couldn't help but find it incredibly inconvenient that she couldn't even change her clothes on her own.

Anyway, after Mercedes had gone to change, a shriek suddenly resounded from outside the changing room. Still in the dress, she bolted out of the room and returned to the store where she found Margaret sitting on the ground with the Grunewald servant and tailor collapsed beside her, blood pouring from their heads. The tailor was simply unconscious, but the servant was not so lucky, as their head was completely cut through.

However, the biggest problem was that Monika was absent from the scene.

The servants who had followed after Mercedes stood there dazed, unable to comprehend the situation. Mercedes helped Margaret to her feet and then inquired:

“What happened, Margaret?”

“I-I don’t know... Someone suddenly came in from outside and took Monika away...”

Mercedes immediately pieced together that Monika had been kidnapped. The servant had been incapacitated to keep them from interfering, while Margaret and the tailor weren’t seen as threats and thus remained unharmed. But the real question was why Margaret was safe. Upon hearing the scream, it took Mercedes less than ten seconds—rather, less than five—to arrive at the scene. Yet, the perpetrator had already fled the scene with Monika in tow. They had to be dealing with a seasoned criminal who had planned to target the noble ladies who visited this establishment in advance.

Still, even assuming that, why had Margaret been ignored? Given the lavish dress she was wearing, she would have certainly been identified as a noble.

Whatever the case, thinking could come later. First, Mercedes needed to chase down Monika’s kidnapper.

“Which way did they run, Margaret?”

“Th-That way!”

“All right. Benkei! Kuro!”

“I am here, master!”

“Woof!”

Mercedes grabbed hold of the dungeon key inside her pocket, and in an instant, Benkei and Kuro appeared from the changing room, leaving Margaret and the servants flabbergasted. Mercedes owned a dungeon, and she could therefore summon monsters wherever, whenever. To be safe, she decided to summon them a bit away in the changing room. No one should suspect her of having a dungeon.

However, the servants were giving Benkei the stink eye. They surely thought

he was a pervert who had been hiding there to peep on the girls changing.

“Benkei, stay here and protect Margaret. Kuro, let’s go!”

“Woof!”

Mercedes hopped on Kuro’s back and dashed out of the room. She didn’t see the criminal, but Kuro had a sharp sense of smell, so by following Monika’s scent, they should be able to find the person. Kuro kicked hard into the ground and jumped onto one of the buildings before the two dashed through the city of Blut leaping from rooftop to rooftop.

“Um... Mr. Benkei? Were you in the changing room this whole time?”

Benkei remained silent. He had been left behind, and unsure how to answer Margaret’s question, he began to sweat inside his armor. He hadn’t been inside the changing room; he had simply been summoned from a dungeon there. However, the existence of said dungeon was a secret, which was why Mercedes had specifically summoned him where others couldn’t see. Basically, he had no choice but to answer in the affirmative.

“Y-Yes...”

“Um, Mr. Benkei? I don’t think it’s right to hide somewhere that girls change.”

“I-Indeed.”

Hidden by his armor and unbeknownst to all, Benkei wept.

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While Benkei was being framed as a pervert, Mercedes had discovered a group who seemed to be the perpetrators. Kuro’s nose had led them to a carriage boldly traveling through town—and it wasn’t just any carriage, but the fanciful carriage of nobility. For some reason, Monika was inside.

Mercedes realized their plan. If they feigned ignorance and exited the city, their kidnapping would be a success. Few would stop a noble’s carriage for inspection, and given the perpetrators’ skills and the fact they had a carriage on hand, they clearly weren’t just any old criminals. Considering they had left Margaret behind, it was perhaps natural to assume Monika had been their target.

In any case, the carriage would soon leave the city, which meant Mercedes needed to destroy it. She had Kuro collide with the carriage and turned the dungeon key into her halberd. In a flash, Mercedes swung her weapon, cutting a hole into the roof of the carriage. Then, she landed on the ground before it.

“Who goes there?! Do you know who this carriage—?”

“Nope.”

With the roof destroyed, the interior of the carriage was visible to all, and Monika was clearly there, gagged and forced to lay down on a seat. It was obvious to anyone that she was a victim of a kidnapping.

There were four perpetrators inside, one of whom was already trying to make his escape by pretending to be a noble, which probably wouldn't help. Still, perhaps he did deserve some praise for being able to respond with theatrics upon suddenly being attacked. However, his actions were rendered meaningless with a swing of Mercedes's halberd, which cut into the whining man's stomach and sent him flying through the air. He landed on the ground like a broken doll and let out a pathetic gasp.

The other three drew their weapons and attempted to put up a fight, but in the blink of an eye, Kuro had jumped two of them. Blood spurted from their necks as they fell to the ground. Kuro had bitten into their throats, knocking them unconscious. The wounds were so deep they would be out cold for a few days, if they woke up again at all.

That left one man remaining, but the fight was over as soon as Mercedes put her blade against him.

“Kuro, keep him still. Bite him if he tries anything.”

Kuro placed his paw on the head of the lone uninjured kidnapper. One wrong move and he was on a trip to the afterlife. The man seemed to understand this, as he remained obedient in spite of his trembling.

Mercedes ignored the droves of vampires who had gathered to watch the sudden battle in town and approached Monika to undo the ropes that bound her.

“Mercedes! I knew you would save me!” Having been let free, Monika tried to

jump on Mercedes to give her a hug, but she callously dodged her. Instead, Monika was left simply embracing empty air and glaring at Mercedes.

Given her joy, Mercedes concluded she hadn't gone through anything too traumatic. Still, she was completely unfazed even though a large wolf had bitten through people's necks right in front of her. Her tolerance for such violent sights was certainly the marking of a vampire.

"You seem fine. In that case, it's time for *you* to tell me exactly who *you* are," said Mercedes as she looked into the eyes of the man Kuro had detained.

"Wh-Who are you? Just how did you...?"

"That's my question. But fine. You don't have to answer me. One of your other comrades is lying there alive, after all." Having her questions answered by a question, Mercedes gave the man a final warning while glancing at the first man she had tossed into the air. Her halberd had cut his stomach open, but he was still breathing. If necessary, she could toss aside the man before her and interrogate him instead.

Realizing this, the man's face grew pale. He finally realized he was in no place to be stalling. "W-Wait. I...I'll talk. We're a band of mercenaries who usually work in the Opitz domain. Well, I say mercenaries...but we're more just soldiers who had no place to go after the end of the last war. We do anything for money, whether it's stealing, working in the underworld, killing, or kidnapping."

"So someone hired you to kidnap her. Who was it?"

"I-I can't tell you. I've been sworn to secrecy by blood pact."

*Blood pact.* It was a seal used between vampires to make a promise unbreakable. Sworn by blood, they vow to never break their agreement, and doing so is a great shame. That vampire will live the rest of their life in disgrace, losing their position and status for good. *That* was how heavy a promise sworn in blood was for vampires. The perpetrators of Monika's kidnapping had likely made such a vow with their client in order to keep his name secret even in the event of failure.

Blood pacts were not magically binding, and breaking one wouldn't result in death or a curse. If one truly wanted to, it was easy to betray the pact. Not to

mention, if these soldiers were really has-beens like the man had stated, their willingness to take on dirty jobs already eroded their trust or honor in the eyes of society. Quite honestly, breaking the blood pact would bring few consequences.

However, logic wasn't what dictated these things. Despite advantages, disadvantages, pride, and reason, the desire to never break the promise of a blood pact was perhaps rooted in something akin to instincts for vampires. Not that any of that mattered to Mercedes.

"Who cares. Tell me."

"H-Have some mercy. I know I'm a good-for-nothing with dirty, stained hands, but I still wanna keep the promise of a blood pact."

"I see. In that case, I'll have to ask someone else."

If this man wasn't going to speak, Mercedes had no use for him. Her words weren't a threat; she was simply discarding him like one throws useless tools in the garbage. However, that was when Monika butted into the conversation and continued the line of questioning that Mercedes had already given up on.

"Wait a moment, Mercedes. I have four questions I'd like to ask him. If you are bound to secrecy by blood pact, you may simply tell me that it is a question you cannot answer," said Monika, her hands haughtily on her hips. Her expression was brimming with confidence, and she seemed to have recalled something that could be useful. As Mercedes had no reason to stop her, she decided to simply watch from the sidelines.

"Here is my first question. Does your client know what I look like?"

"Y-Yeah, he does... Who wouldn't know what the person they're trying to kidnap looks like?"

"Then my second question. Do they know what Mercedes and Margaret look like?"

"N-No... I don't think so. He said he wasn't interested."

"Third question. You said you are a band of mercenaries, but does your client know the names and faces of everyone in your group?"

“Nope. I doubt he even remembers what I look like.”

“Last question. You said you work in the Opitz fiefdom. Can we assume that is where your carriage was headed?”

“I-It was...”

After asking her fourth question, Monika nodded in satisfaction. Had she learned something? Mercedes couldn't help but feel the answers to her questions were so obvious they weren't worth asking.

Monika turned to her with a haughty grin on her face. “I have an idea!”

Mercedes had a bad feeling about this...

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The Opitz fiefdom had been ruled by the family of Viscount Opitz for generations. While it paled in comparison to the Grunewald fiefdom that included the city of Blut, it ruled over many farming villages and a large town. Inside that town was a manor, and today, it was the venue of a birthday party for the current head of the family, Viscount Ebbo Opitz.

Ebbo had married into the family twenty years prior. The previous Viscount Opitz had an eldest son, another one a year his junior, and three daughters who could have served as heir, but the two sons had never returned home after an accident, and the eldest daughter had been attacked while out on a horseback ride and perished. Pummeled by one tragedy after the other, the current head of the family was Ebbo, a man who hailed from a baron family and was the husband of the middle daughter. There had been a forty-year age gap between him and his wife, but for vampires—especially nobles—such occurrences were hardly rare. They had been blessed with three sons, and the couple got along so well they were the envy of others.

Attending this man's birthday party were Mercedes and Monika. Dressed in their blue and red dresses, they were so touchingly lovely they attracted much attention despite their young age. It was all but apparent that those around them had appraised them as suitable future mates for their sons. Surely, there should have been none who wished to court the girls for themselves.

“My, what a lovely lady you are! To someone such as myself, who only loves

young girls, you seem to be an angel sent straight from heaven. May I ask for a dance?”

Yet, there was one. The glare Mercedes shot this lolicon while ignoring his request was so cold it would register as absolute zero. Then, she walked away and addressed Monika in exasperation. “Hey. Do you really think this is a good idea?”

“I do,” she replied unhesitatingly. Children were often overconfident, and it seemed that Monika was a prime example of this herself. Her face still brimming with self-assurance, she went into the details of her “good idea.” “Listen up. First, the culprit captured me and tried bringing me to the Opitz domain in a carriage for nobles. That must mean he was headed somewhere that made a carriage of that type a necessity...or, he was headed somewhere that it would blend into the crowd.”

“...You think?”

Monika was quite confident in her answer, but there were plenty of other reasons they might need a carriage made for nobles. They could easily maneuver in the city, and they were rarely inspected. Mercedes couldn’t help but think they’d be handy in carrying out any kidnapping, no matter the situation. Still, she decided to keep quiet and let Monika continue.

“And the only place like that is the manor of Viscount Opitz! We came here and lo and behold, he’s holding a birthday party. It’s all but guaranteed he’s the culprit!”

“Hmm...” Mercedes wasn’t completely discounting her line of reasoning, but there were other manors in the Opitz fiefdom besides the Viscount’s, including ones housing nobles. Mercedes thought there was a decent chance that a party or other function of high society would be happening there, but it was evident that Monika hadn’t considered that possibility.

“That means that if I appear at this party, the culprit will approach me of his own accord! Luckily, he knows my face but not yours. He’ll certainly assume that the kidnappers completed their job and brought him his target!”

“I doubt he’d be that stupid...”



Monika's reasoning was so full of holes it was tragic. Even in the miraculous case she was right, Mercedes doubted that someone foolish enough to approach her himself could be the culprit. Mercedes was only ten years old; no reasonable person would conclude that she was in with the band of mercenaries.

"I see you have safely delivered Monika Grunewald. I expected nothing less from a group of mercenaries so reputable in the underworld. What a good decision it was to employ you."

Apparently, he really was just an idiot. Watching the plump man so gleefully spit out a line that proved his guilt without a shadow of doubt gave Mercedes a headache.

"You are Viscount Ebbo Opitz, yes?"

"Indeed. I am your client."

Yup, he was dumber than dumb. With that thought on her mind, Mercedes remembered what had occurred just a few days prior—the person who had sent Monika that overbearing and idiotic marriage proposal was none other than Viscount Opitz. As stupefying as it was, Monika's simplistic reasoning had proven true, and it had her grinning haughtily.

"Let me once again confirm our agreement. We were to kidnap Monika Grunewald...yes?"

"Relax. Those were the terms of our deal, and that is the girl you have brought to me."

"Then my job is done. May I have a copy of our blood pact?"

"Hmm... Fine."

The contract between the mercenaries and Viscount Opitz was to keep his name secret in the event of failure, so it was obvious that they wouldn't have a copy, as it would name Viscount Opitz and unmask him as the perpetrator. Mercedes was certain that Opitz had the pact, and with the job now done, it was rendered useless. In such cases, it was common practice for both parties to have a copy, as with only one party in possession of the contract, they'd be able to change it unilaterally.

The contract recorded both the job and promise not to reveal Viscount Opitz's name if they failed, and with that, they had all the evidence they needed. In all honesty, he was so dim-witted even Mercedes felt bad for him, but by now, it was already obvious he was the culprit they had come looking for.

Mercedes silently slammed the back of her hand into Viscount Opitz's face. He shrieked as he collapsed to the ground, blood spurting from his nose. The sudden turn of events sent all the nobles attending the party into an uproar.

Mercedes, however, paid them no mind and waved the contract in the air. "Ebbo Opitz. We are arresting you under charges of attempting to kidnap Monika Grunewald. Can you come with us to Blut?"

"Wh-What?! You're betraying the blood pact?!"

"Have you really not realized yet? I'm not one of the kidnappers you hired."

The kidnapping of a duke's daughter caused a stir to spread through the room. Some even expressed their disbelief, but with the unshakable evidence of the blood pact before them, none could voice opposition. Vampires were sensitive to the smell of blood, so they could easily tell whose blood had signed the contract with the same accuracy as voice recognition of fingerprints. With just a bit of digging, it would easily be discovered that the blood was indeed Opitz's.

"I know exactly who this young lady is! She's my great, beautiful elder sister, Mercedes Grunewald!" For some reason, Monika introduced Mercedes with haughty glee.

Mercedes had yet to figure out why her sister had so much affection for her, though there wasn't anything complicated behind it; she was just a vampire, and like most, she favored those who were strong and beautiful.

"Aaaaagh! How dare you scoundrels claim to be the daughters of a duke! Attack them! Attaaaack!" wailed Opitz, as if he were a stereotypical petty underling. At his command, around twenty servants came pouring into the hall. Slightly annoyed at the whole ordeal, Mercedes took out her halberd and guarded Monika.

The first five vampires to draw their weapons rushed at her, but she swiped

them all away with one slash from her halberd. Then, she neutralized the arrows flying her way with gravity magic, causing them to fall to the floor. The archer was shocked that they had missed, and while he stood there shaken, Mercedes picked up a plate from a table and threw it right at his head. She grabbed another three plates and created an attractive field around her foes who were farther away, and when she tossed the plates into the air, they were sucked right into those vampire's heads. Some of the servants rushed her from behind, but she staved them off by kicking a table in their direction, trapping them underneath. Then, she made sure to stomp on their faces to shut them up.

Mercedes couldn't help but think once again that skirts made fighting quite difficult; the frills were quite the hindrance.

"What are you doing?! You're only up against one little girl! I'll give one million—no, ten million yerks to whoever defeats her! Goooo!" shouted Opitz, seeing his servants losing their will to fight after Mercedes's rampage. Luckily for him, the promise of monetary reward lit a fire under them, and they all charged her at once. There were ten men left, and Mercedes knocked aside three with a single swipe of her halberd while dodging the swords of those who had managed to get close to her. While there was strength in numbers, there was a limit to how many could attack at once, which was only around four.

With the way she dodged the flurry of swords with a flip of her skirt, it could certainly be considered dancing. Her practiced movements were more elegant than any dance moves, especially in the eyes of vampires who respect strength above all else. Before she had even noticed, the nobles in the room were entranced by her movements to the point of silence. As she danced, she defeated one vampire, then kicked another, and eventually, there were no more servants left to defend Viscount Opitz.

"Aaaagh! I am the famous Lord Ebbo who once rendered the beastmen to rust on my blade in the war! Some little girl shall not best me! I'll land at least one blow!"

Viscount Opitz raised his sword with both hands and bolted at her head-on. He had surprising grit, but even if he had once been a war hero, he was now nothing but a portly noble. His rotund stomach jiggled in the air as he ran,

which failed to inspire fear. Mercedes knocked the sword from his hands with her halberd before hitting him in the face with the middle of her blade. After that, he comically flew through the air before crashing onto the ground, bringing multiple tables down with him. He lay there still, and while he was still alive, it would be a few days until he woke up. All she had to do was bring him to Blut and leave the rest to Bernhard.

With the battle concluded, cheers erupted in the hall as the nobles swarmed Mercedes.

“How marvelous! Your dance was wonderful! Are you looking for a suitor, young little lady? I’ve got about thirteen grandsons who would love to...”

“No, don’t listen to her. I’ve got a younger brother who’d...”

“Hear from everyone before you make any hasty decisions! Take a moment to meet my son who...”

The nobles offered her marriage proposals one after another, but she had zero interest in them. Thus, she picked up Monika and the unconscious Opitz and decided to make her escape.

“Kuro!” He had been waiting outside the manor, and at her call, she climbed on top of him. Then, they ran from the manor as the desperate cries of the nobles ready to marry her faded in the distance.

\*\*\*

“I hear you made quite the debut,” remarked Bernhard with the slightest hint of joy.

A few days had passed since the kidnapping incident. Mercedes had passed Viscount Opitz over to her father, and after getting a summary of what had transpired, he had gone through the motions and whatnot before throwing Opitz into the dungeon where he currently was and would likely remain for a century.

“You did well. Now I don’t have to deal with the ugly parasites myself.”

“You’re welcome.”

Viscount Opitz was so insignificant he could hardly be considered a threat.

However, it would have been exasperating watching that oaf act a fool. Bernhard had planned to crush Opitz himself, but thanks to Mercedes, he no longer had to. After giving him that sarcastic reply, Mercedes walked toward the door to leave when she noticed a pile of letters on the table.

“Are these trash as well?”

“They’re marriage proposals, all addressed to you,” answered a smirking Bernhard as if he had been waiting for her to ask. Her rampage at the party had made her the talk of high society, it seemed. Realizing this had been the societal debut Bernhard had spoken of, she couldn’t help but hang her head.

Mercedes didn’t want to have to think about dancing or marriage proposals for a long, long time.

## Afterword

If this is your first time reading a book of mine, it's nice to meet you. To those who are already familiar with me, hello again. My name is Fire head. Thank you for reading *Mercedes and the Waning Moon*.

This story follows a girl who conquers dungeons while following side quests and detours. I've always been a fan of RPGs, and I often abandoned the main story to go off on side adventures. I'd gather all the collectibles, play the card games, etc., and often, I'd realize that the time I spent on side content was ten times what I spent on the main quests. In extreme cases, I'd grow so engrossed in it I'd forget about the main story entirely.

This work was an exploration of such side content... Not really, but it did come from a place of thinking it was okay to decide where you go next without an ultimate destination in mind. It's fine to have a hero who spends all their time playing board games and doesn't defeat the demon king, or a legendary mercenary who childishly destroys children at a card game to steal all their rare cards. It's okay for your goal to be getting a high score in all the arcade games even when the story is asking you to defeat a certain enemy.

That's how little of a predetermined goal there is, and how little the main character themselves knows what they want to do or where they want to go. Mercedes is the protagonist searching for a goal that *they* can consider as having cleared the game. Given that, her story may move at a snail's pace, but I hope you all can enjoy it.

I'd like to extend a deep thanks to TO Books for publishing this novel, as well as KeG who breathed life into the characters with their beautiful illustrations. They're all much, much cooler and cuter than I imagined, and even just for that reason, I am so thankful *Mercedes* was published.

Finally, I'd like to once again thank everyone who read this book. That

concludes this afterword.

If there is a next time, I hope to see you all again.

Fire head

# 【 MERCEDES GRUNEWALD 】

(Known as "Mercedes Calvert" at the guild. She uses her mother's maiden

Race: Vampire

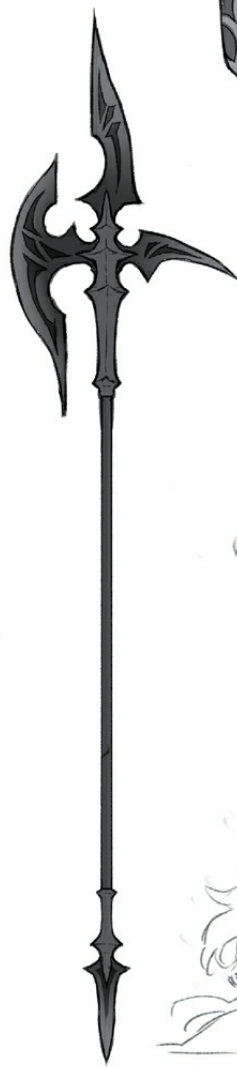
Creed: To utilize everything and anything she can

Aspiration: To live a life without regret

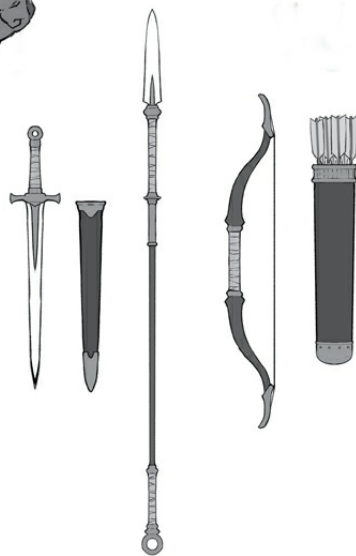
Likes: Sweets, blood sausages (they use blood, but they don't repulse her since humans eat them too)

Dislikes: Staying in one place, her past self, all foods made with blood besides sausages (she finds them delicious, but that only makes her detest them more. Her dislike triumphs.)

Personality: Doesn't like interacting with others more than necessary







## 【 BENKEI 】

Race: Ogre

Creed: Strength is justice

Aspiration: To serve the person  
who defeated him

Likes: Battles

Dislikes: Not getting to join a battle

Personality: Stubborn in the ways of the  
warrior and fixed in his thinking





## 【 KURO 】

Race: Schwarz wofang (black wolf)

Creed: Maintain the pack

Aspiration: To serve Mercedes

Likes: Mercedes

Dislikes: Weirdos who he can't tell if they're  
wolves or humans (aka werwolfs)

Personality: Loyal and brave







## 【ZWÖLF】

Race: AI

Creed/Aspiration: None

(She's a dungeon management AI, so she has no creed or aspirations of her own)

Likes: The humans of days past

Dislikes: The current gods

Personality: Calm, collected, and not very emotional



## 【BERNHARD GRUNEWALD】

Race: Vampire

Creed: The strong should lead

Aspiration: World domination and unification

Likes: Control, coming out on top through strength, his brilliant child

Dislikes: Weaklings who act self-important, incompetent allies, his useless children

Personality: Arrogant and egotistical













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Mercedes and the Waning Moon: The Dungeoneering Feats of a Discarded Vampire Aristocrat Volume 1

by Fire head

Translated by Maddy Willette Edited by Travis Welsh

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