









# As a Reincarnated Aristocrat,

I'll Use My Appraisal Skill to Rise in the World

5

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## As a Reincarnated Aristocrat, I'll Use My Appraisal Skill to Rise in the World 5

#### A VERTICAL Book

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Fourteen years had come and gone since I was reborn into another world as Ars Louvent.

My early childhood was idyllic. I was never exposed to the horrors of war in any real capacity, and with the help of the Appraisal skill I'd possessed since birth, I assembled a host of highly capable retainers to stand by my side, recruiting Rietz, Charlotte, Rosell, and Mireille.

Peace, however, would not last. A conflict of succession centered around the Duke of Missian's title escalated dramatically, plunging the duchy into a state of all-out war. The side I allied myself with emerged victorious in the end, but not before countless individuals lost their lives. I came to realize over the course of that conflict that I had been reborn into a very dangerous world.

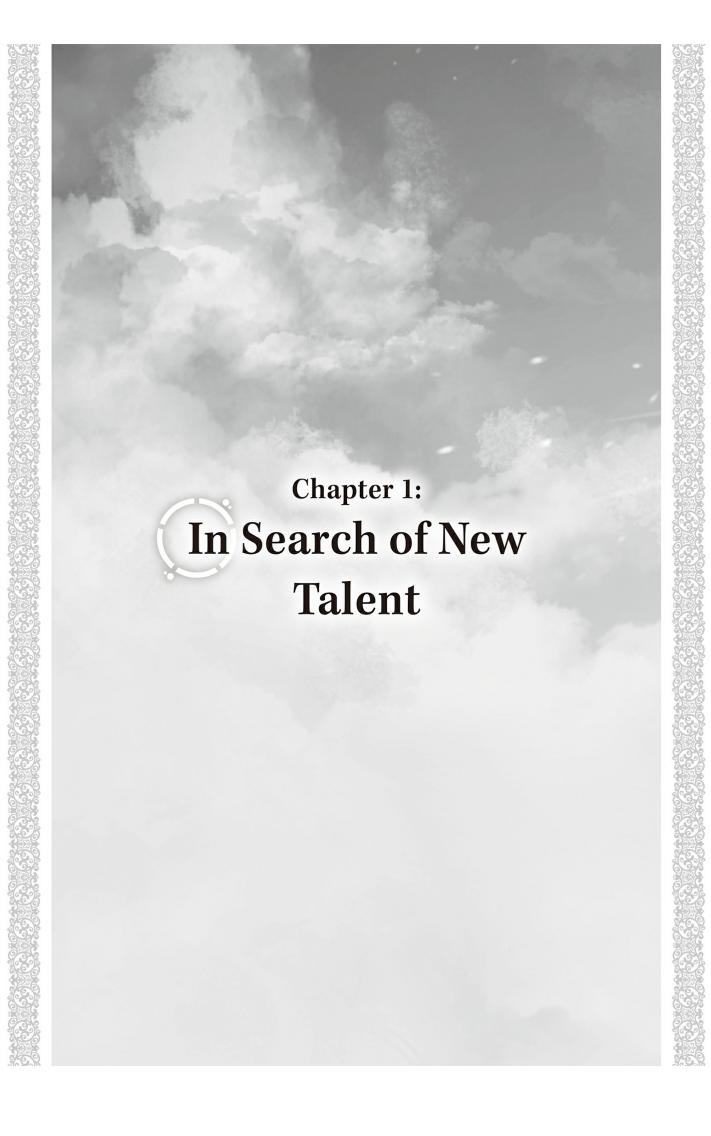
That being said, the war brought me success on a personal level, earning me the position of Count of Canarre. I had become a lord of high enough standing to live in an honest to god castle. I had a fair deal of apprehensions about governing such a vast swath of territory, but thanks to my ever-capable retainers, I'd managed to more or less make the best of the situation...until, that is, a sudden invasion by our neighboring duchy, Seitz, threw Canarre into a state of crisis all over again.

I didn't think I was going to make it out of that one alive, if I'm being honest, but somehow, we managed to repel Seitz's assault. That victory helped contribute to the ultimate triumph of the candidate for duke who I'd supported, Couran, over his rival and younger brother, Vasmarque. Couran's victory would ultimately quell the flames of war that had consumed Missian. And then, soon

after the war ended, I found myself getting married, in spite of my young age.

And that, more or less, is how my life had gone since I was reincarnated. It couldn't have been more different from the life I'd lived back in Japan. I was a real workaholic back then, and spent the overwhelming majority of my time at home, at work, or traveling from one to the other. I was a boring man with no hobbies and no wife—in fact, I'd never even dated anyone. It was still hard to believe that someone like me had lived through life or death battles and become the ruler of a castle, and frankly, all that excitement had taken its toll. I was tired, and wanted to stay as far away from warfare as I could, for the time being.

Thankfully, Missian had been united. The situation in Summerforth was still tense, to be sure, but it seemed safe to say that it'd be a little while before war broke out again. It was only a matter of time before the inevitable happened, though, and I knew I had to take advantage of this moment of peace to raise Canarre into a stronger and more prosperous territory than ever, ensuring we'd have the might and resources to repel any further attacks with ease. I was dedicated to defending this land, whatever it took.



If there was one thing I knew for sure, it was that the key to strengthening my realm was to recruit as many capable subordinates as I could find. As such, the moment I had the chance I began devoting myself wholeheartedly to an aggressive search for new talent.

My Appraisal skill lets me see not only people's current statistics, but also their latent potential and aptitudes for certain fields. In addition, the end of the war meant that I could distribute notices regarding my recruitment drive throughout the city of Canarre, as well as Lamberg, Torbequista, and Coumeire.

Before long, the day I would be conducting my first interviews arrived. I'd arranged for two sets of interviews, one today and the next three days afterward. I'd gone to great lengths in my previous recruitment drives, so I hadn't been expecting all that many applicants to show up this time, but I was shocked by the turnout when it came time for me to meet with them. Somewhere around five hundred people had shown up in the hopes of entering my employ.

Apparently, my overwhelming victory in the war with Seitz had raised the reputations of me and my retainers in the eyes of the people. As a result, candidates had arrived not just from Canarre but also from the surrounding counties as well, all hoping to serve the up-and-coming count they'd heard so much about. A decent number of people had lost their jobs in the recent conflict, which accounted for at least part of the turnout.

In any case, more candidates was a very good thing in my eyes...except for the fact that I could only appraise so many people in a single day. Going through

five hundred people in one day was beyond my capabilities, so out of necessity, I decided to narrow it down to around a hundred and fifty people, for the time being. I would've gone with a first come, first served system, but unfortunately, the fact that I hadn't anticipated this much of a turnout meant that I hadn't had anyone keep track of who had arrived first. I made a mental note to rectify that oversight and appraise the first hundred and fifty people who arrived in sequence, next time.

I had the jobseekers ushered into the castle and appraised them one after another. The last time I went looking for new retainers, Canarre had been in a precarious place economically and I'd been forced to be picky about who I hired. This time, however, we had a little surplus funding to work with. Couran had rewarded me generously for my service, and the end of the war had helped bolster the local economy as well, so our tax revenue was expected to rise.

We'd also been able to sell off the aqua magia we'd purchased for the war, as well as the stock of aqua magia we'd stolen from Seitz's army during our previous engagement, gaining us another sizable quantity of gold. It seemed likely that we wouldn't have to fight any battles any time soon, and I'd decided that using those resources to recruit and train talented individuals would pay off more in the long run than keeping them around for the next battle.

I would spend as much money as possible to help Canarre grow, in terms of both its population and its economy. In the long run, that would bolster our fighting force far more than making short-term investments in the moment ever could. It was, after all, only a matter of time before another war broke out, and I wanted to be ready for it. We'd managed to emerge victorious in the previous war despite our inferior numbers, but there was no guarantee we'd be so lucky next time.

As a side note, Rietz was the one who'd suggested selling our aqua magia reserves. My only real involvement had been signing off on his plan. We didn't sell all of it, of course, but we'd kept only the bare minimum that we might need for emergencies, and I'd been surprised by just how much of the stuff we'd managed to steal. It secured us plenty of funding to hire the people I wanted to.

I was planning on employing anyone I found who had average maximum stats above 65, hoping to find at least one person with stats above 80, and figured I'd also consider anyone with lower scores but high Aptitudes. Generally speaking, I'd found that if someone had at least one A-ranked Aptitude, I'd be able to find a use for them. The exception to that was people with the Mage Aptitude—in those cases, a B-rank was enough for me to take them in.

My Appraisal skill gave me information about people's place of origin and family, which meant it was easy for me to tell if anyone lied to me about either of those things. Anyone who lied to me was, in my book, suspicious enough to rule out hiring on the spot. My skill also told me about their opinions regarding their current lord, if they had one, and if they did, it seemed very likely that they were a spy, ruling them out as well. It would complicate matters if someone who had served a lord from Seitz or some other non-Missian duchy arrived, of course—I would have to have them captured and interrogated to see what they were after—but that was still just a hypothetical scenario at this point.

I set about appraising the first hundred and fifty candidates, one after another. Unsurprisingly, finding people who suited my requirements wasn't that easy. I did, however, notice that a lot more women had shown up to be appraised this time. I had to wonder if the fact that I'd chosen to hire Musia had made its way into the rumor mill. "More women than last time" didn't mean there was an equal sample of the sexes, of course—there were still far more

men, overall.

Out of the first fifty candidates I appraised, three were impressive enough to make the cut, all of them men with high Valor stats. None of them were truly exceptional, but they were at least capable enough that I could expect great things from them on the field of battle. Appraising the remaining hundred candidates left me with another ten prospective hires, and while none of them were above and beyond either, I was still reassured to know that I was off to a solid start in bolstering our roster of personnel.

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Three days later I did it all over again, this time operating on a first come, first served basis. The first candidate who arrived to be interviewed was a man with a medium build and rather narrow eyes.

"Good day to you! You must be the Count of Canarre, Lord Ars Louvent himself! It's a wonder, honestly—to think a man could become a count at your age! Oh, but I'm getting ahead of myself. Virge Sammado, fallen aristocrat hailing from the land of Paradille, at your service!"

Virge blathered on and on about his background, even though I hadn't asked about it yet. He was quite the talker, it seemed.

Former nobility weren't the most common candidates, but Virge also wasn't the first I'd seen. In any case, I tried appraising him.

Virge Sammado

Age: 23

Male

### Status:

LEA: 31/44

VAL: 45/51

INT: 66/74

POL: 71/90

Ambition: 30

## Aptitudes:

Infantry: C

Cavalry: D

Archer: D

Mage: D

Fortification: D

Weaponry: D

Naval: D

Aerial: D

Strategy: B

His Politics score caught my attention immediately, and everything my ability told me about his history lined up with what he'd already explained to me. He wasn't lying, it seemed.

"I see you're already familiar with my background, but for formality's sake, allow me to introduce myself as well," I said. "I am Ars Louvent, the Count of Canarre. To begin, I'd like to know why you wish to enter my service."

"My own house fell to ruin on account of our debts," explained Virge. "I was already searching for employment, and when word of the Count of Canarre's

achievements reached my ears, I knew in an instant that I belonged by your side! I've traveled all across Summerforth since my house's collapse, visiting realms far afield in search of a master to serve—from Paradille to Scheutz, Seitz to Rofeille, and even the capital itself! Did you know that even in lands where you barely speak the same language, you can get by with gestures alone? But I digress—I've seen much and learned more throughout my travels, and I'm certain that knowledge will be a boon to you should you choose to employ me!"

He'd spun that answer into an extended self-endorsement. He really did have a way with words, as well—or rather, the way he spoke sort of reminded me of how professional entertainers talked. Maybe that was his excellent Politics score at work? A part of me thought he was talking a little too much, but I'd already been thinking that we could use more people capable of diplomacy, so taking a silver-tongued man like Virge into my service felt like it could be a solid move.

"So, then?! Will you hire me?!" Virge exclaimed, leaning forward eagerly.

I wanted to, but I'd made a policy to not give applicants their results on the spot. I told him he'd be informed of my decision at some point in the near future, then had the next applicant brought in for appraisal. It wasn't a great day, all around—in the end, I found four people in total who I wanted to hire, Virge included.

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"So you will hire me? I had a feeling you'd make the right decision! I've heard rumors that you have quite the discerning eye for subordinates, and it seems

they weren't exaggerated after all!"

I had just informed Virge that I'd decided to bring him aboard, much to his delight. It seemed he had self-confidence to spare.

"So, what will you have me do for you? Direct your troops on the front lines, perhaps? I'm not much for fighting, but I have wit and wisdom to spare! You might find me a surprisingly capable commander!"

"No, that's not what I had in mind," I replied. His current Leadership score was quite low, after all, and even his maximum score was unimpressive. Putting him in command of troops would have been a very poor decision.

That being said, I had to wonder—what would be the right task to entrust to him? A silver tongue was a talent that could be put to use in all sorts of fields, so making him a diplomat was far from my only option. He could assuage the concerns and complaints of dissatisfied citizens, for instance, or help out with the county's business dealings. There were all softs of domestic tasks that he could prove useful for.

At the moment, Rietz was more or less in charge of managing Canarre on a domestic level. I handled all matters related to recruitment, of course, but since a lot of the intricacies of managing the territory were more or less beyond me, I'd delegated the better part of them to Rietz. He also had plenty of drills to lead for our military, so to be honest, he had too much on his plate. Braham and Zaht had started coming into their own recently, at least, which meant that he could entrust them with some small number of tasks, but his workload was still excessive.

In light of all that, part of me thought that assigning Virge to serve as Rietz's assistant for the internal affairs side of his work might be a good call. I didn't expect him to be genuinely helpful right from the word go, of course—he'd need

time to study up and learn the ins and outs of the position first—which might mean I'd just be piling more work onto Rietz's plate in the short term. Then again, if my Appraisal skill was to be believed, Virge was remarkably capable in the field of politics and would be helpful in the long run. In the end, I decided to go with my gut and make him Rietz's assistant.

"For the time being, you'll be assisting Rietz in his duties," I explained.

"Rietz...that would be the Malkan man in your employ, wouldn't it? Rumor has it he's an absurdly capable warrior! You mean to say I'll be training under his watchful eye?!" Virge exclaimed, excited by the prospect.

Does he want to be a warrior? Maybe he's one of those people whose interests and talents just don't match up.

"No, I didn't mean that you'd be fighting," I clarified. "Rietz is responsible for a variety of domestic affairs, and you'll be helping him with that side of his work."

"Oh, so I'll be an administrator, not a warrior? I suppose it's true that I might be more suited to that sort of field," Virge admitted. "Very well, then! I must say, though, it seems that no matter where you go, the Malkan people are abused and enslaved. I've always felt for them, which makes it all the more impressive to me that Rietz is so staggeringly capable. It's a marvel, truly!"

Apparently, Virge was the sort of person who pitied Malkans rather than embracing the popular prejudices most held toward them. I was starting to think that he might be a decent person deep down.

"Well then, no time to waste! I shall report to Rietz posthaste! Where can I find him?!" Virge asked. He was downright brimming with enthusiasm.

I called in one of the castle's servants and had Virge escorted over to Rietz. He

was clearly a man with a spirit of self-improvement, and I had high hopes that once he'd had some time to grow, he'd be very helpful for Rietz's work.

I went on to interview the other individuals who I'd chosen, picking a task to assign to each of them. Almost everyone I'd found was suitable for roles in our military, Virge aside, and by the end of it I'd managed to find a solid number of new recruits. I'd also exhausted myself, and decided to take the next day off.

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The next day, I was resolved to rest up and recuperate from my recruitment efforts. My siblings, however, had other plans and came running up to me right after we'd finished eating.

"Ars, Ars! Let's practice sword fighting!" shouted Kreiz.

"Oh, no you don't! He's reading books with me today!" countered Wren.

The two of them were eight years old now, and had grown up quite a bit, but were still very much children at heart. Despite being twins their personalities could hardly have been more different, and they almost never saw eye to eye when it came to how they spent their time. The one thing they had in common was their tendency to go through this exact same argument every time I had a day to spend with them, which I couldn't help but chuckle at. I'd always made a point of calming them down by accepting both of their invitations, but today, things played out a little differently.

"All right, then—how about the two of us read together?" Licia suggested with a smile. She happened to be right beside me, and was most likely aware of how draining playing with kids could be. This was her way of trying to share my

burdens.

"Now that's a great idea! Nice one!" yelped Kreiz. He'd taken quite the shine to Licia, and seemed to view her as something of an older sister figure. On the other hand...

"No!" Wren snapped as she turned her back to Licia. "I hate you!"

Wren hadn't minced words with that one, and Licia's expression froze solid.

Although Kreiz had warmed up to Licia following our marriage, Wren had gone in the opposite direction. For reasons I couldn't understand, she'd developed an intense dislike for her. I was mystified. As far as I'd observed Licia hadn't done anything to deserve that sort of distaste, and she was great at winning people over. I had to imagine it was rare for people to so plainly dislike her.

"H-Hey, stop that, Wren! You can't just tell people you hate them!" I scolded.

"I hate what I hate, and there's no changing that!" Wren snapped back.

I glanced over at Licia, and found she was still frozen stiff. Being disliked that openly must have come as quite the shock to her, but she soon shook it off, walked over to Wren, and crouched down to look her in the eye.

"Would you please explain what it is you hate about me, Wren dearest?" asked Licia. "I'm sad to hear you feel that way, so please tell me what I could do to change your mind."

For a moment Wren hung her head in silence, but finally, she began to explain herself. "Well...you're Ars's wife, aren't you? But I was supposed to marry him, not you," she sulkily muttered.

I guess that explains things: she's just jealous of Licia, plain and simple. She's still a kid, so I guess it only stands to reason she'd feel that way.

"Oh? Well in that case, you needn't worry at all!" said Licia. "Ars is a very open-minded man. I'm sure he'd be happy to take you as his bride as well, in the future!"



"Really?" asked Wren.

"Of course! Wouldn't you, Ars?"

"Y-Yeah, sure," I replied.

"Hurray!" Wren shouted, eyes sparkling with glee.

I knew that we were just trying to get her off Licia's case, but even so, agreeing to marry my little sister felt pretty wrong. Then again, she was just a kid and it did ease the tension for the moment, so I was probably just overthinking it. I was confident she'll have gotten over that particular desire by the time she grew up enough to get married, anyway.

"So, have you stopped hating me now?" asked Licia.

"Hmm... Dunno," Wren replied, cocking her head as she pondered the question. It seemed she wasn't going to get over her animosity that fast.

"That makes sense. We've barely even spoken, after all. Why don't you tell me about your interests, Wren? What do you like?" asked Licia, doing her best to strike up a conversation.

This time, Wren played along and replied, "I like my brother, and books, and flowers too!" she said.

"What a coincidence! I *also* like Ars, books, and flowers," said Licia. She'd been rather casual about throwing me onto her list, which set my heart aflutter a little...though of course, she said as much to me on a regular basis, particularly at night in our bedroom. "Do you grow your own flowers?" Licia continued.

"No, I just look at them," said Wren. "I don't know how to grow them."

"Oh, is that so? Well, I happen to be well-versed in botany. Would you like to try growing flowers with me?"

"You can do that?! That's amazing! I wanna try!" Wren squealed with excitement. She and Licia had a surprising amount in common, it seemed. I had a feeling that they'd be fast friends before I knew it, and that I might not have to worry about their relationship after all.

"I guess we can go practice sword fighting, then," I suggested to Kreiz.

"All right!" he replied.

The two of us headed outside and began our practice. A few hours later, I returned to the castle, feeling drained. Kreiz still hadn't had enough for his taste, but I just didn't have the stamina to keep up with him. I made a mental note to work on that, and maybe take up running—if I didn't build up my endurance, there was a chance it could come back to bite me in the long run.

In the meantime, Licia and Wren seemed to have warmed up to each other. I found the two of them chatting away happily, and was relieved to see them getting along.

"All right, watch closely! When you want to charm a gentleman, making the right expression is key! You have to tilt your head and turn your gaze up toward him, like this..."

"Oooh, I see! Is this right?"

...Just what on earth is she teaching her? I wondered. Wren's maximum Intelligence and Politics scores were both exceptional, and a friendship with Licia could lead to growth in both of those areas. Watching the two of them talk gave me the distinct feeling that Wren might turn out to be an incredibly capable woman in the future.

The next day, I got right back to work again. First up on the itinerary: meeting with Mireille, who had arrived at Castle Canarre to visit. She barely ever stopped by unless we had a meeting scheduled, so I had to assume she wasn't just coming to say hi. I had her shown into the parlor, where the two of us could chat in private.

"Hey there, kiddo," said Mireille as I stepped into the room. "So, how's the newlywed life working out for you?"

"Well enough, I suppose," I replied, a little surprised that she'd jumped straight into small talk.

"That girl—Licia, right? She seemed like a pretty tough one. Bet she's gonna have you whipped in no time, eh?" Mireille asked with a sneering grin. I'd thought the same myself on a number of occasions, so I couldn't argue with her.

"So, did you come here for something specific today?" I asked, steering the conversation back on track.

"Yup," said Mireille. "Remember how I told you I wanted to talk with my brother Thomas? I wanted to ask if you'd reach out to Couran about that whole deal."

"I had a feeling that's what this was about," I replied.

Mireille's younger brother, Thomas, had sided with Vasmarque in the recent civil war. Thomas was an exceptionally capable man, and after Vasmarque's defeat, Couran had repeatedly attempted to convince Thomas to work for him instead. Thomas, however, remained loyal to his late lord, and had stubbornly refused to renounce that loyalty.

Mireille, however, seemed confident that she could win her brother over. I hadn't been able to think of any other matters she would want to discuss with me, so I'd sort of figured this was what she'd be asking about, and had been proven correct.

"All right, then," I said. "I'll send a letter to Couran at once. When his reply arrives, I'll get in touch and—"

"Sounds like a waste of time to me," said Mireille. "How 'bout I deliver the letter, and take care of business right after Couran reads it?"

"That...would be more efficient if he says yes, I guess, but if he doesn't agree to let you see Thomas, you'd have wasted your time."

"Sure, but that's wasted time I can make up for. Figure I'll just do some sightseeing in Arcantez, if it comes to that."

"You do know you're supposed to be taking care of Lamberg, right...?"

"Oh, the place isn't gonna fall to pieces if its baron goes on vacation for a little while! And hey, if something *does* go wrong, you can just send Rietz to handle it," Mireille replied dismissively.

I hate to say it, but Rietz is overworked as is! Then again, I managed Lamberg for long enough that if worse comes to worst, I know I could step in and settle things myself. I might have to ask Licia and Rosell for a little help, but I can't see things getting bad enough that I'd have to call Rietz in.

"All right. I'll write that letter now," I said, then set about doing just that.

It seemed clear that Mireille had a plan in mind to talk Thomas onto our side, so I started by requesting that she be allowed to meet with him, face to face. After that, I explained that we thought there was a chance he would agree to work for us as long as he was working under his sister in particular, and

requested for Thomas to be made into Mireille's retainer if it turned out that way. I knew that Couran wanted to keep Thomas on a tight leash, so there was every possibility he would turn that last request down, but on the other hand, Couran surely knew how hard it would be to bring Thomas around. With that fact in mind, I had high hopes he would see reason and accept our terms.

I finished the letter and handed it over to Mireille. "Thanks," she said. "All right! I'm off to drag my brainless little brother back with me whether he likes it or not, so look forward to that."

And just like that, she was off. She'd seemed confident in her ability to get through to Thomas, but personally, I had plenty of doubts. From what I'd been able to tell, her brother wasn't fond of her to begin with. She'd told me to look forward to her success, but I decided to keep my expectations low and accept whatever result I got when the time arrived.

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Some time later, Mireille arrived in Arcantez, the capital of Missian, bearing Ars's letter. She made the trip accompanied by two guards, which was fairly light as far as a typical baron's escort went. Mireille was a capable enough warrior to protect herself under most circumstances, so she could feel safe traveling in a small group.

"Question is, will Couran grant me an audience?" Mireille said to herself.

Couran was the current Duke of Missian. That was a position that kept people busy in the best of times, and with the civil war having only just ended, it was all but certain he barely had a moment to spare. Mireille also hadn't sent any

advance word of her arrival, so whether or not she'd be able to see him was very much in doubt. That being said, she had one advantage that made her believe she had a good chance of getting an audience: Ars's letter. Couran had taken quite a liking to the young count, after all.

Mireille made her way toward Castle Arcantez. A guard stopped her at the front gate, but when she whipped out her letter, which bore the seal of House Louvent, he changed his tune. The guard told her to wait for just a moment, then went over to give orders to another guard who was stationed nearby—likely his subordinate. That second guard ran off, and before long, Couran's right-hand man Robinson arrived.

"Oh, if it isn't Mireille," said Robinson. "What brings you to Arcantez?"

"The kiddo—" Mireille began, then paused to correct herself. "His Lordship Ars Louvent has entrusted me with a letter that I'm to personally deliver to Cou...to Lord Couran," she explained.

"Personally, you say?" asked Robinson.

"Right, and if at all possible, I'd like for him to read it and give me his reply immediately. Can he spare some time? It's not a long letter, so it should only take a moment."

"As it so happens, His Lordship is unoccupied at this very moment. I shall inquire with him at once," Robinson said, then headed back into the castle, leaving Mireille to grumble under her breath about how if Couran wasn't busy Robinson could've just taken her right to him.

A few minutes later, Robinson returned.

"His Lordship the Duke will see you. Right this way, please."

Mireille followed Robinson's lead and headed into the castle.

Robinson led Mireille to the duke's chambers, where she found Couran seated in a lavish chair. He looked over as she entered the room, his expression stern.

"Mireille..." said Couran. "What business do you have with me? Has Ars decided to relieve you of your position? I'm afraid to say that I have no intention of taking you into my service if he has."

"He sure as hell—most certainly has not," said Mireille, remembering at the last second to mind her manners around the man who now ruled Missian.

"It is a pleasure to see you, Lord Couran. I've come today to deliver a message from my master Ars," she continued in a register so polite, she barely even sounded like herself anymore.

Couran scowled. "Enough of that tone. It's unsettling, coming from you."

"Oh, that so? Yeah, I've never been a fan of all that stuffy garbage," said Mireille.

"On second thought, you'd do well to act slightly less eager to abandon formality," Couran sighed. "So, a message from Ars, you say...? Why would he send you to deliver it?"

"It'll make sense once you've read it," Mireille said as she handed the letter over.

Couran opened it up and scanned its contents.

"He wants you to recruit Thomas for him ...? Does that stand any chance of

working?"

"Sure does," Mireille said with a nod.

"I'm sure you're aware that he despises me, and I have the distinct impression that he doesn't think highly of you either," said Couran.

"He's still my little brother at the end of the day. As long as I can talk to him, I'll be able to work something out—though that's only if I can make him my personal retainer. He's definitely not gonna accept anything else, so I'm hoping to bring him back to Canarre with me."

"Yes, the letter said as much," said Couran. "But of course, Ars's people are my people by extension, and our only prominent enemy at the moment, Seitz, lies directly across the border from Ars's county. There's a pressing need to bolster Canarre's defenses, so I have no objections to sending him additional personnel. In other words, if you truly believe you have a chance to convince Thomas, you're welcome to try. Keeping talent like his locked up would be a waste."

Couran gave Mireille the go ahead, then instructed one of his men to lead her to Thomas's cell. That said, he wasn't being kept in Castle Arcantez's dungeon. The dungeons were a far cry from a comfortable environment, and since Couran had always hoped to bring Thomas around eventually, he had decided to keep him locked up in a rather large room in the castle proper instead, with two armed guards stationed outside of his door at all times to ensure he wouldn't escape.

"We will accompany you during your meeting with the prisoner," one of the guards explained.

"I'd rather talk to him alone," said Mireille.

"I'm afraid I can't allow that. Our orders were clear."

Unfortunately for Mireille, the sort of soldiers who would casually defy their instructions didn't tend to end up guarding a duke's castle. She concluded that they weren't going to let her talk them into giving her one-on-one time with Thomas, and gave in, allowing the guards to follow her inside.

The guards opened the door, and Mireille stepped into the chamber. Sitting within was Thomas Grunzeon, looking rather haggard compared to when they'd last met.

"Hey there, Thomas," said Mireille. "You look like you've been having a run of bad days, huh?"

Thomas shot his sister a sharp glare.

"What do you want?" he growled, his tone low and full of barely-disguised fury.

"Is that any way to thank your big sister for coming to visit you?" said Mireille.

"I was expecting tears of joy!"

"Hmph. The only tears of joy I'll shed for you will be when I get word someone's done you in," Thomas snapped.

"So harsh! Honestly, who do you even take after? Your parents must've been real pieces of work!"

Thomas stared at Mireille in stony silence.

"Come on, that's the part where you're supposed to go 'they're your parents too,' or something! Keep up, will you?"

"Really—what are you here for?" Thomas sighed.

"To talk some sense into you," said Mireille. "How long are you planning on

staying locked up in this dingy cell? Get over it and come with me. We're getting out of here."

"No," Thomas flatly and immediately replied.

"Why not? Don't tell me you like this place?"

"Like hell I do. I wouldn't be caught dead serving the man who killed Lord Vasmarque, and that means I'm not moving an inch."

"Well, good news, then: you don't have to. You'll be serving my lord, Ars Louvent. No need to follow Couran's orders."

"But this 'Ars' is Couran's vassal, isn't he? In other words, I'd be serving him in all but name."

"Can't deny that, I guess, but I have a feeling you and Ars would hit it off if you gave him a chance. Plus, he's got a real eye for people's talents. More and more capable folks are going to be gathering under his banner from now on, mark my words."

"Then they can be his retainers instead of me. Good luck to him."

Mireille let out an exasperated sigh at her brother's stubborn attitude.

"Why are you so fixated on Vasmarque, anyway?" she asked. "Why swear eternal fealty to a man who got beat?"



Thomas's scowl grew fiercer still.

"Don't you *ever* mock Lord Vasmarque in front of me again. I owe him a debt, and I'll never forget it."

"Hah! A debt?" scoffed Mireille. "Maybe you do, sure, but have you forgotten everything you owe me, too?"

Thomas flinched. Mireille had hit him where it hurt with that argument.

"Just how many times did I pull your sorry hide out of the fire when we were kids? Don't tell me you've forgotten? You can't think that you earned your way into Vasmarque's service by your own talent alone, right? You've never been able to accomplish anything unless you're following someone else's orders. You're a bit bigger these days than you were back then, sure, but otherwise, you haven't changed a bit."

Thomas fell into silence. A moment later, Mireille leaned forward and whispered into his ear. His eyes widened.

"Can't make any guarantees, of course," Mireille said as she pulled away again. "You should meet with Ars, though, at the very least."

For a moment, Thomas remained silent. "I'll give it some thought," he finally replied.

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While Mireille was off in Arcantez, I worked my way through several more crops of potential new recruits. At the moment, I was seated in my office, running through a stack of papers on which I'd recorded the ability scores of all

the candidates I'd appraised.

"Did you find anyone capable enough to satisfy your standards this time, Lord Ars?" asked Rietz, who was in the room as well.

I shook my head. "Not this time, I'm afraid," I sighed. "Being able to appraise them helps, for sure, but when all's said and done whether or not anyone worth hiring comes to me is all a matter of luck. I'll just have to stay patient and keep at it."

"I suppose so," said Rietz. "We can only hope that Mireille's efforts to recruit her brother will be a success. His presence could make a massive difference."

"Honestly? I don't have my hopes up. He's her brother, sure, but I don't think that recruitment is ever going to be Mireille's strong suit."

"I couldn't agree more," said Rietz.

"Oh, by the way—you know the man I sent to work under you, Virge? How's he been doing so far? Do you think he'll be useful?" I asked.

"I do," said Rietz. "He's a rather clever man, and sensible as well, which has been a blessing. He talks a little too much, perhaps, but in a certain sense he's turned that into one of his strong points as well. For the moment, I've put him in charge of responding to the townsfolk's grievances and dealing with merchants from afar."

I was somewhat relieved to hear that Virge had already proven his worth. I'd been worried that he and Rietz wouldn't see eye to eye, and that in the worst case he might have held Rietz back.

"Though I must admit, I feel somewhat adrift now that my own workload has been reduced," Rietz added.

Not having too much work makes him feel lost? You're such a workaholic it's

going to be the death of you one of these days, Rietz.

"Permission to enter, Lord Ars?" a voice called out from the other side of my office's door. I recognized it as one of my servants' voices, and gave them permission to enter. "Lady Mireille has returned from her excursion," the servant said as they stepped inside. "Do you have time to meet with her, Your Lordship?"

It seemed Mireille was back from Arcantez. I just had to hope that she'd brought Thomas with her.

"Now is fine, yes," I said. "Please bring her here."

"At once, Your Lordship."

A few minutes later, Mireille arrived at my office.

"Heyo! I'm back!" she said cheerfully as she stepped inside.

"How did it go?" I asked, hoping that her good mood was a sign she'd found success.

"Hm? Oh, right-Yeah, I brought him with me. Get in here!"

At Mireille's urging, a giant of a man stepped into my office behind her. There was no mistaking him. I'd only seen Thomas once before, when he was captured and brought to Castle Staatz, but his appearance was distinct enough to be unforgettable. I appraised him as well, just to be safe, and was greeted with the same high-spec status screen I'd seen the last time we met.

"Thank you for coming to meet with me," I said. "I am Ars Louvent, the Count of Canarre."

"Oh, I get it now... You're the kid from back then," Thomas muttered as he

laid eyes upon me. I couldn't remember him having taken a specific note of me the first time we'd met, but apparently, he'd been aware of my presence, at the very least.

"May I take your presence here as a sign that you've decided to enter into my service?" I asked. Thomas, however, shook his head.

Huh? Wait, then what is he here for?

"I won't be swearing fealty to you. I can't—at least, not yet," said Thomas. "That said, I'm willing to spend some time working for you and your domain. It won't take me long to figure out if you're a lord worth serving. And of course, if you decide that I'm not worth employing, you're free to lop my head off any time you feel like it."

In other words, Thomas was asking for something akin to a trial period. I had a feeling that Mireille had already explained about my appraisal skill to him, but from his perspective, I was still nothing more than a child. There was no telling whether he'd come to approve of me, but at the very least, this represented a step forward.

"Understood," I said. "I will strive to prove to you that I'm a man worthy of your loyalty."

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Trial period or not, Thomas was now, for all intents and purposes, my retainer. That, needless to say, meant that I had to find a job to give him. Considering his capabilities, part of me wanted to give him a position of importance, but on the other hand, handing off a vital job to him the moment

he signed on felt like it could cause more problems than it solved.

My best idea was to put him under Mireille's direct command and have him help with the management of Lamberg. When I proposed the plan, however, Thomas was unequivocal in his opinion of it.

"I refuse to follow her orders," Thomas said with a disgusted scowl.

"Oh, simmer down, you little brat," said Mireille. "But honestly, compared to Canarre there's just not much that needs doing over in Lamberg. I have managing the place under control, so I'd actually agree that he'd be better off doing something else."

In the end, I asked Rietz and the others for their opinions, and wound up tasking Thomas with training Canarre's army. The troops he'd commanded back during the battle of Velshdt had been the cream of the crop, which proved that he was a man who could be trusted to bring out our soldiers' full potential. Rietz had been handling the task when he could up until then, so putting Thomas in charge of it would lighten Rietz's workload even further. It seemed like an ideal setup to me.

With that, Thomas's position among my workforce was settled. I knew I could trust him to do a good job, so the only question was whether I'd be able to demonstrate to him that I was a lord worth serving. I didn't have any specific ideas about how I could make a show of my abilities, so instead, I decided that I'd be better off just carrying out my business like I always did and hoping for the best.

The next day arrived, and I got right back to work. Although having Thomas working for me was a big step forward, I still couldn't afford to stop searching for new talent to bolster my personnel pool.

Our tax revenue had been on an upswing, thanks possibly to a recent warming of the local economy. I'd lowered taxes slightly in the hopes of earning the general public's favor, and the fact that our net income had increased in spite of that looked like a sign of just how much business was booming. I made a point of walking around outside of the castle every once in a while, and the atmosphere in town alone seemed a lot livelier than they'd been before.

Greater tax revenue, of course, meant that I could afford to hire even more people, so my search for new talent was still far from over. I went right back to conducting interviews, as usual, but almost a full day of searching later I hadn't come across anyone who truly suited my standards. The best I'd found were a man with a B-ranked Mage Aptitude, and another man with a B-ranked Cavalry Aptitude, both of whom I'd decided to hire. Their Valor scores were reasonable enough, though all of the rest of their stats were unimpressive. They hadn't met my usual cutoff in terms of their overall stats, in fact, but judging by their aptitudes they would be able to do good work as a mage and a horseman in the long term.

Finally, I reached the last candidate of the day. I still hadn't found anyone aside from the two men before, at that point.

The interviewee was a woman. She had oddly long bangs, lengthy enough to mostly cover her eyes, and as far as I could tell she was in her late teens or early twenties. Her build was just about average, and she was wearing a rather plain set of dull gray clothing. Her gaze was glued to the floor, as well–I got the sense she was nervous.

"Welcome to Castle Canarre," I said. "I am the count, Ars Louvent."

The woman didn't reply. Or rather, I couldn't hear her reply, though I could see that her lips were moving. It seemed she'd just spoken incredibly quietly. I was already getting the sense that she was a rather gloomy person, and I was starting to wonder whether she was even interested in working for me. Maybe someone had forced her to apply against her will? For the moment, I decided to appraise her.

Enan Lugez

Age: 21

Female

Status:

LEA: 2/22

VAL: 12/21

INT: 56/80

POL: 4/66

Ambition: 0

Aptitudes:

Infantry: D

Cavalry: D

Archer: D

Mage: D

Fortification: B

Weaponry: S

Naval: B

Aerial: B

Strategy: C

Her current stats were remarkably low...but some of their maximum values

were rather high. Moreover, she had an S-ranked Weaponry Aptitude, which was as high as it could go. With the right training, I knew she could be a huge asset. I had a feeling that she could speed up the progress of Shin's airship project, and could even help develop new forms of magical weaponry.

My skill informed me that she was from Missian, her parents were alive, and she had two brothers. Nothing about her background stood out as suspicious to me, so I immediately concluded that I wanted to bring her on board...but when I tried to speak with her, a problem arose—that being the fact that I *tried* to speak with her, but mostly failed.

Enan's voice was just so quiet, I couldn't hear her at all. We couldn't communicate, and when I asked her to speak up she just blushed and stared an even deeper hole in the floor. She was as unsociable as a person could get, and if it weren't for my appraisal skill, I would have decided that she wasn't worth hiring. In fact, even with the knowledge of how remarkable her latent capabilities were, I had my doubts about whether or not I'd be able to draw them out to their fullest.

Then again, finding people with latent talents that wouldn't otherwise come to light is exactly what makes my skill so useful. I might as well give her a chance, I decided. And so, the day's interviews ended with Enan as my final hire.

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A few days later, I called everyone who I'd decided to bring into my service back to the castle for a second interview.

The two men, a potential mage and horseman, didn't ring any alarm bells in the personality department. They had never cast a spell or ridden a horse, respectively, but I knew their talents would bloom with a little training and told them as much.

The problems began with my final hire, Enan. Once again, she couldn't bring herself to speak loud enough for us to have a real conversation. I was starting to suspect that something was wrong with her vocal cords and she was physically incapable of speaking at an audible volume. That would make conversation a long-term impossibility, so I ended up giving up and asking her to try communicating through the written word instead.

Enan looked a little abashed about the suggestion, but began answering right away. It wasn't uncommon for uneducated people in this world to be illiterate, and I was worried that if that was the case for her all hope would be lost, but thankfully, she seemed capable of reading and writing—and for that matter, her handwriting was quite clean.

"My apologies. It has been a very long time since I've had the chance to speak with anyone, and I find myself unable to raise my voice," she wrote, her hand trembling all the while.

That, it seemed, implied her quiet tone wasn't the fault of an illness after all. I had to wonder what sort of environment she'd been living in to not talk with anyone for that long, but at the very least, this meant that she might learn to speak up again as she got used to being around people.

"My name is Enan Lugez. I am sorry for being unable to so much as introduce myself to you," Enan wrote, looking more apologetic than ever. Apparently, her inability to even say her own name was bothering her as well.

"No need for apologies. If you can't speak, then so be it," I said, hoping to

make her feel a little better about the situation, but judging by her expression it didn't seem to have done much to cheer her up. She started writing again just a moment later.

"Have I truly passed your interview? I thought that such a thing would be impossible, and I can still hardly believe it."

She had a point. Normally, no one would dream of employing a person who couldn't even introduce herself, and it seemed she was a little suspicious of the fact that I planned to do so.

"I have something called an Appraisal Skill," I explained. "It allows me to perceive people's latent talents, and I've decided to hire you on account of yours."

"I have a talent?" Enan wrote, looking more confused than ever. It seemed she would take a little more convincing. Her gaze dropped to the floor once more as she sunk into thought, until finally, she jerked her head back up again with a start. She was blushing, for some reason, and her hand trembled as she began to write again. "I'm terribly sorry for not realizing your intent sooner. I understand now. I could not possibly refuse your advances, so please, feel free to use my body however you see fit."

"Well, now we're on *completely* different wavelengths," I sighed. It seemed I'd accidentally convinced her that I was only hiring her for her body, though how she'd found her way to that particular misapprehension was beyond me. I explained that she had the wrong idea, and Enan blushed brighter than ever and flew into a panic.

"I-I'm so sorry!" Enan said as she gave me a deep bow of apology.

I...actually heard her that time! Her voice had still been quiet, but it had

reached my ears for once. Her panic had, unexpectedly, led to a breakthrough and helped her remember how to speak out loud.

"I... I spoke," Enan whispered. She still looked embarrassed, but I thought I could hear a hint of joy in her tone. I, for one, was glad to see her get over the issue so quickly, considering I'd already been wondering how she'd get by if she never managed to recover her voice.

"I'm glad to see you've found your voice again," I said. "I just want to make it very clear, for the record, that I am in no way hiring you for your body. As a matter of fact, I'm married."

"O-Oh, I see," said Enan. "I'm terribly sorry. People have always told me that my looks are the only thing I have going for me, so I just assumed..."



I was starting to get the feeling that Enan had been raised in a less than ideal environment. As a side note, her bangs were hiding her face so effectively that I couldn't comment on her looks at all. Maybe she would have been cute if she cleaned them up a little?

"So, I have a talent...? What is it?" asked Enan.

"I can guarantee that you have a talent for crafting and building," I replied.

"D-Do I...? A talent for crafting...?" Enan repeated, puzzled by the claim. That wasn't too surprising, considering her current stats were so low. Hopefully with a little practice, her capabilities would become apparent to her.

For the time being, I decided to introduce Enan to Shin. I headed off to find him, with her accompanying me.

"Is this really the right place...?" Enan muttered as we arrived at Shin's workshop. She seemed bewildered by what she was seeing. "What are they even doing here?" she asked as she looked around. Considering the answer was "researching airship technology," I couldn't blame her for her confusion. This was probably the only workshop of its kind.

"This is the workshop of a man named Shin," I explained. "At the moment, he's working on building an airship."

"What in the world is an airship?"

"It's a type of vehicle that uses magic to fly. They haven't built a functioning vessel yet, but a recent test flight was a success."

"I-Is that truly possible?" Enan said, eyes wide with astonishment. It seemed she'd already taken an interest. "B-But...huh? Wait, wait—does that mean that

you brought me here to help him make these 'airships'?" she continued, realizing what I was expecting of her.

"Yes," I replied.

"N-N-N-No way, I can't! How could I make something that incredible?! I don't even know the first thing about magic!" Enan shouted so loudly that I could hardly believe she'd been unable to speak earlier that very same day.

"Yes, I'm sure that asking you to jump straight in and produce results would be a bridge too far," I admitted. "That said, you have a talent for this sort of work, and if you study here under Shin's guidance, you may find that talent will begin to blossom before you know it."

"My talent...might blossom?"

Enan sunk into thought. A short while later, she began to mutter.

"To be honest, it's difficult for me to believe everything you're saying... I've never found a skill that I'm average at, much less talented in... But on the other hand, I hate the thought of living without ever accomplishing anything at all...so I'd like to give this a try, if you'll allow me."

It wasn't the most optimistic of declarations I'd ever heard, but she was somewhat motivated, at the very least. That motivation was key—without it, there was a very real chance that her talent would never come to the forefront. This felt like a good start.

Enan and I proceeded into the workshop. It seemed they were busy manufacturing something, at the moment. My best guess was that they were assembling another airship, and if I was right, then it seemed it would end up being a little larger than the last one I'd seen Shin test. His work, it seemed, was making steady progress.

"Huh? Oh, hey, if it ain't Lord Ars! What brings you here today?" asked Shin, who'd been supervising the construction and shouting out orders until he noticed us. "Oh, and who's the dame?" he added.

"I've just taken her into my service. My intent is to have her help with your work," I explained, jumping straight to the crux of the matter.

Shin looked a little skeptical. "You want her to help out in the workshop? Just so you know, this work takes a lotta brawn! It's gonna be pretty tough for a girl like her. Unless she's got some wild muscles hidden under that shawl?"

"I'm afraid not," I replied, "but I've appraised her, and found that she has an incredible talent for crafting. She's a complete amateur at the moment, and her knowledge in the field is lacking, but in the long term I'm certain she'll be an asset for your airship development."

"Hmm... So basically, you're saying it's up to me to train her up? And if she's a total amateur, that means I'll be starting from a total blank slate? Teachin' her from square one?"

"Yes, that's correct."

"The airship's already keepin' me busy, y'know? I don't have a ton of time to spare," Shin sighed. "But then again, good help's hard to come by and I was just hoping to get another hand or two on deck... I may be a genius, but doing it all on my own ain't all fun and games. Maybe you've got a point. If she's got potential, she could be worth training! That's a big ol' *if*, though," he added with a probing glance in my direction.

"She has talent, don't worry. I personally guarantee it," I replied without hesitation. I wasn't about to start doubting my skill's capabilities now, after everything I'd been through.

"All right, then, she's in," said Shin. "You saw through my talent too, so I'll go 'head and trust in your judgment."

With that, the matter was settled for now. How it worked out in the long term would be up to Enan and Shin. Of course, considering I'd just given him my guarantee it *would* work out, I would be in a bit of a fix if her talent remained dormant forever.

"Okay, new blood," said Shin, "what am I supposed to call you?"

"Um...ah!" squeaked Enan. "M-My name is Enan... And, umm," she added, turning to me, "I take it this small individual would be Shin?"

"Who the *hell* are you callin' small?!" Shin bellowed, his face flushed red with fury. Apparently, his height was something of a sore subject.

"Oh, I-I'm so terribly sorry!" said Enan. "I just assumed that the head of a workshop would be, well, big and muscular, so I was surprised to find myself working for such an adorable individual instead."

"A-Adorable?!" Shin spluttered, his face growing redder than ever.

It seemed that Enan was the sort of person whose mouth moved faster than her mind could keep up with. Maybe avoiding the trouble that caused, I reflected, was what had led her to be so quiet in the first place.

"Hey, are you sure this is a good idea?" asked Shin.

"Probably," I replied after a moment of hesitation.

"Oh, well ain't that just perfect... But, whatever. I'll look after her for now, anyway, and if I decide she ain't cut out for this I'll send her packing right back up to the castle."

"Worthless, the lot of you! Pick up the pace, or you'll be losing battles that should be *effortless*, you miserable slugs!"

Thomas's voice reverberated through the barracks. It was set up in the immediate vicinity of Castle Canarre, and was a large facility where our troops both lived and trained for the battles that were sure to come. Ever since Thomas had been assigned to oversee Canarre's soldiers' practice, he'd been living with them as he carried out his instruction duties.

Thomas's training regimen was brutal, to say the least. Rietz had never been lax with discipline to begin with, but Thomas kicked it up to a new, relentless level. The fact that he was a big, burly, and exceptionally tall man just made him all the more intimidating, and the soldiers soon found themselves terrified of him. That was intentional on his part, of course. The last thing a drill sergeant needs is for his men to look down on him.

Canarre's soldiers are quite skilled, aren't they? Thomas reflected. In spite of the jeers and abuse he threw at them, he held his men in rather high esteem. Supposedly, a Malkan called Rietz oversaw their training until I arrived. I'm impressed he brought them up to such a high standard.

Just by watching his soldiers practice, Thomas had come to admire Rietz, the man who had trained them.

As Canarre's soldiers worked through their drills, the sound of a massive explosion shook the barracks. That was hardly a rare occurrence, on account of the fact that a facility for Canarre's mages to train in had been set up right next to it. The jobs of the army's mages and more ordinary foot soldiers were

different, so typically, they carried out their practice separately, coming together a few times a month for joint training sessions.

"That has to have been Lady Charlotte," whispered one of the soldiers. "Her magic's a cut above..."

"You never know—it might've been that newcomer Musia," commented another. "She's been getting better and better ever since we drove Seitz back from the border."

"You two! Less talking, more training!" barked Thomas.

"Y-Yes, sir!" the pair of soldiers squealed, then went back to their practice.

We lost the battle of Velshdt in part because I underestimated the power of Couran's mages. The mage named Charlotte in particular—her abilities are a threat beyond all others, Thomas reflected, remembering his inglorious defeat at the hands of Couran's army. Rietz and Charlotte... You could search the whole of Missian—no, the whole of Summerforth—and only find a handful of individuals as capable as they are. And that's not even mentioning that Rosell child. He's still young and inexperienced, but his mind is already astonishing. Canarre has amassed a collection of retainers far more capable than I'd ever expect from a remote border county of its nature.

Thomas knew better than most just how hard it could be to find capable subordinates, which made the state of things in Canarre all the more mystifying to him. He thought back to the words that Mireille had whispered to him back in his cell in Arcantez.

"The kid I work for's an interesting one, y'know? Way I see it, it might be only a matter of time before Missian—no, before the whole empire's under his thumb. In other words, it's only a matter of time before he brings down Couran, the

man you've got such a grudge against. Seems like a guy worth meeting, don't you think?"

At the time, Thomas hadn't taken her seriously. His impression hadn't changed much upon his first meeting with Ars, either. He hadn't struck Thomas as a remarkable person at a glance.

But if he's the reason why all of these people have gathered under the same banner, then maybe she wasn't bluffing after all, Thomas thought. His opinion of Ars was beginning to shift. Could he have been the wild card that turned the battle against me? If so, then he bears just as much responsibility for Lord Vasmarque's death as anyone...

No sooner had the thought crossed Thomas's mind than he shook his head.

No, that's not right. Ars may have contributed to Couran's victory, but at the end of the day, he was only acting under Couran's orders. If I'm going to avenge Lord Vasmarque, then there's only one man I need to kill: the one who ordered my lord's execution. Plus...the biggest reason why I could never serve Couran is that Lord Vasmarque told me he wasn't fit to be the duke. I could never serve a man who occupies a seat he's unworthy of.

Thomas had absolute faith in the late Lord Vasmarque. No matter what, he would never question his judgment.

But if Ars is worthy...then maybe he will come to blows with Couran someday. Ars doesn't seem like the overly ambitious sort, so he won't be the one to turn traitor...but the minute Couran decides that Ars's power is getting out of hand, it'll all come crashing down. If that happens, then my loyalty will lie with Ars, no question about it, thought Thomas. He felt he had a pretty good idea now of what direction he and Ars's future was heading in. 'Course, that's all just hypothetical. No telling whether it'll turn out that way or not. For now, all I can

do is train these soldiers up to be as fighting fit as I can make them.

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"Good morning, Ars," Licia whispered into my ear mere moments after I woke up.

"Good morning, Licia," I muttered back to her. We were married, so it goes without saying that we shared a bed, but I still hadn't gotten used to waking up to her face every single morning. She was so beautiful that my heart skipped a beat every time, even though I knew it was high time I acclimated to my new lifestyle.

The two of us got up and chatted as we ate breakfast together.

"It seems like Canarre has livened up recently," commented Licia.

"It has," I agreed. "You wouldn't believe how much it's changed since I first visited this place."

I had an up close and personal vantage point over the city, and so it was easy for me to tell how much it had been changing on a day to day basis. There was an energy to the city now, and it wasn't just thanks to the war being over. Things had been improving on a domestic level as well.

According to Rietz, one of my newest hires, Virge, had been doing very solid work so far. He had a natural-born silver tongue, and had been both quelling the concerns of the populace as well as making it easier for them to start up new business ventures. Rietz and Rosell had been the ones to come up with policies that would encourage Canarre's economic growth, really, and all that was left to do was put them into practice, but Malkans still weren't trusted by

the general populace, and Rosell just wasn't good enough at selling his ideas yet. Virge had been just the man they needed to compensate for those shortcomings and implement their plans.

After Licia and I finished breakfast, I perused a variety of reports as I headed over to my office. There was very little in the way of bad news—mostly just notes telling me that the population was increasing, the economy was booming, and Shin's research was proceeding steadily. One report, however, caught my attention.

"Suspicious movements from Seitz, huh...?" I muttered to myself as I scanned the note.

That particular report had been Pham's work. Seitz had attempted to invade Canarre, and although we'd diminished their numbers when we drove their army back, it hadn't been such a total victory that we could afford to let our guards down. That's why I'd decided to deploy the Shadows, asking them to report everything they could learn about Seitz down to the most minute details.

According to this latest report, Seitz had started stepping up their production of weaponry, purchasing aqua magia from other duchies, and bolstering their army's numbers. They'd only just suffered a major defeat, though—would they really be so eager as to charge right in again for another round? The other possibility that sprang to mind was that now that Missian had united, they expected us to invade them and were preparing for the eventuality. The second explanation seemed a lot more likely to me, but I couldn't be certain I wasn't missing something.

Canarre's own army had remained unchanged after the war ended. Seitz didn't seem likely to pose a threat for the immediate future, so I'd decided to invest most of our money into the economy and the development of airships. It

seemed, however, that it was about time for Seitz to come back onto our radar, which meant bolstering our military's numbers would be a good idea.

Just as I was thinking I'd have to discuss the matter with Rietz, Rietz himself happened to step into my office to deliver a report. "Good morning, Lord Ars! I've received word that I wanted to pass on to you as soon as possible," he said. He sounded just a little flustered, so I decided asking for his advice could wait until after I'd heard what he had to say, and gestured for him to go on. "It seems a band of mercenaries has arrived in Canarre, and are seeking a contract with House Louvent."

"Mercenaries...?" I muttered. "I'm guessing these ones aren't specialized like the Shadows, right? They're the sort of mercenaries who'd be fighting alongside our army for money?"

"That's correct," said Rietz. "The band in question is of middling size, with around two hundred members. They don't have much of a reputation, and I'm unaware of how capable they may be, but I'm certain that judging their abilities will be the simplest of tasks for you, of course."

I'd just been thinking about bolstering our troops' numbers when lo and behold, a band of mercenaries arrived on my doorstep. I could hardly have asked for more convenient timing.

"Have you already read the Shadows' report, by the way?" asked Rietz.

"Yes," I replied. "It looks like Seitz is making some suspicious moves."

"So it seems," Rietz agreed. "That's not a guarantee that they'll be attacking in the near future, but it would do us well to be prepared for such an eventuality, just in case. Canarre's population has risen of late, and we've been bolstering out troops in proportion to that growth, but I can't guarantee we'll

be prepared should worse come to worst."

It seemed that Rietz had already been thinking along the exact lines I'd been planning to question him on. "I agree—bulking up our army seems like a necessary step. First things first, I suppose I should meet with those mercenaries and decide whether or not I want to take them in."

I arranged for the leader of the mercenary band to be brought to me at once. Rietz set out to lead him to the castle, and he returned before long with a brawny man who looked to be somewhere in his thirties. He was unshaven, and his face struck me as rather rugged as well. He looked capable at a glance, but of course there was no way of telling whether that impression was correct or not without appraising him.

"I'm the leader of the Grandeur Band, Ulberht Seon. Thanks for your time," said the mercenary, his face stuck in a complete deadpan. I returned the greeting, and Ulberht went on to explain the history and accomplishments of his mercenary band to me. He listed off the battles they'd been involved in, and explained what they'd achieved in the process.

Most prospective employers would have judged the band's worth by Ulberht's explanation, but my appraisal skill made that step unnecessary for me. Taking a look at Ulberht's abilities would allow me to figure out how capable his band would be, at least to some extent. Even if his soldiers were exceptional as individuals, they wouldn't be worth much as a group if their commander wasn't up to snuff.

I more or less tuned out Ulberht's explanation and focused on appraising him instead. His current Leadership was at 65, his Valor was 71, his Intelligence was 55, and his Politics 45, with all of those scores sitting close to their maximum values and none of his Aptitudes standing out as particularly excellent. He

wasn't incapable, by any means, but he didn't strike me as the sort of man who would excel as a leader either. There was a chance that some of his subordinates would be more impressive, of course, but it wasn't like I could have one of them take his place as leader unilaterally, meaning I had no choice but to conclude that he and his men wouldn't be an exceptional fighting force all around.

That being said, the fact that they wouldn't be above and beyond didn't mean they weren't worth my time. The quality of our soldiers made a huge difference, of course, but at the end of the day quantity reigned supreme. It'd be a big problem if they were so incapable that they held the rest of our troops back, but their leader's stats struck me as acceptable enough to make that unlikely, and I could see hiring them being a worthwhile move...though of course, that all depended on how much they were asking for. If Ulberht named a figure that was out of my budget, I was prepared to see him out the door.

"How much are you hoping to be paid for your services?" I asked.

"Our standard rate's fifteen gold a month," said Ulberht. "And that's in addition to room and board, which we'd be expecting you to provide."

"Fifteen gold..." I repeated to myself. Considering the increase in tax revenue brought about by the economic upswing, it wasn't an unaffordable rate, and fifteen gold for the services of two hundred soldiers didn't seem like a bad deal in and of itself...but when I factored in the costs of feeding and housing all those men as well, it started to feel like a much less reasonable sum.

"May I have a word, Lord Ars?" Rietz asked, then leaned in to whisper in my ear. "How would you rate his abilities?"

"He's not incapable, but not exceptional either," I whispered back.

"I see... In that case, I believe it would be best for you to turn him down."

"You think so? Weren't you just saying that we needed more men?"

"We would do well to bolster our forces, but there's no need for us to jump on the first mercenary company who happens to come our way."

"You think there'll be more of them?"

"I do. I believe that Canarre is a very attractive target for mercenaries looking for work, at this particular moment. Not only is the improvement of our economy a sign that we have money to spare, we also stand across the border from Seitz, an enemy of Missian, meaning that the chances of a conflict breaking out are high. Considering those two factors, I would not be at all surprised if more mercenary companies came to offer their services in the near future."

"That makes sense," I muttered. I recalled that Rietz had been a member of a mercenary band himself, at one point. Presumably, he would be very familiar with the circumstances of their trade. I decided that this was a moment to trust in his judgment—if more mercenaries were bound to show up, then it made no sense to jump the gun and hire the first group to reach our doorstep.

"My apologies, but I'm afraid we will not be contracting your services at this time," I replied.

"Understood," said Ulberht after a slight pause, looking a little disappointed. "We're planning on sticking around in town for the next week or so, so feel free to get in contact if you change your mind. I'll be staying at an inn called the Rahbek if you need to find me."

I bid Ulberht goodbye, and had him shown out of the castle. I consulted with a few of my other retainers over the course of the day, and concluded that it had been a good idea to turn him down for the time being.

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A few days later, Rietz was proven correct when more mercenaries arrived to call on me. It wasn't just one band this time, either—three groups all arrived at almost the same time. Rietz had been right on the money, though that wasn't much of a surprise.

In terms of scale all three groups were smaller than the Grandeur Band, with each of them offering around fifty men a piece. That, of course, meant that I would have to pay less to both hire and house them.

I interviewed the captains of the first two bands, appraising each of them, and found their abilities to be decent enough, but not impressive. I was starting to get the impression that truly capable mercenaries would be able to sell themselves on name recognition alone. There likely weren't all that many bands out there that hadn't earned a decent amount of fame yet despite being exceptional.

Around the time I was coming to that conclusion, I called in the third band's leader for appraisal.

"I'm the leader of the Bangle Mercenaries, Locke Cidre," said the man who arrived to represent the third group. He was rather handsome, with slicked-back hair and a youthful appearance all around. I gave him an appraisal at once.

Locke Franbalt

Age: 27

Male

Status:

LEA: 77/85

VAL: 63/70

INT: 69/73

POL: 55/62

Ambition: 50

Aptitudes:

Infantry: B

Cavalry: A

Archer: C

Mage: D

Fortification: C

Weaponry: D

Naval: D

Aerial: D

Strategy: B

His stats were quite solid, though the fact that he'd told me a different surname than my skill identified had me a little curious. His first name was the same, at least, so it seemed possible there was a mundane explanation for the inconsistency—surnames could change depending on one's family circumstances, for example. That was nothing compared to the Shadows, most of whom had declared completely different names than my skill displayed for them.

Judging by Locke's ability scores, it seemed safe to say that he was

competent. His maximum Leadership of 85 was particularly noteworthy—it wasn't every day I came across someone with a score like that. Troops led by a commander with a high Leadership score would, of course, grow stronger as well. He only had around fifty men, making his force a somewhat small one, but I could still see quite a bit of potential in him.

I took the time to glance at the profile my skill displayed for Locke as well. He was from the duchy of Ansel, it seemed, which was where the capital of the empire was located. He hailed from a county called Bangle in the duchy's northwest, and had presumably named his mercenary band after his homeland.

Nothing else about his profile stood out to me, with the exception of his abundance of siblings. Apparently, he had five older brothers, one younger brother, two older sisters, and three younger sisters—twelve siblings in total, counting Locke himself. Two of the older brothers and one of the younger sisters had already passed away. Clearly, he'd been born into a rather unusual family. Maybe that had something to do with why he'd given me a last name my skill didn't pick up on? It could be that he'd been given up for adoption on account of his parents just having too many kids, for instance.

In any case, nothing about Locke's profile made him stand out as a potential problem to me. That meant all that was left was to ask him about his desired wages, and when I did, he named a quite reasonable price of five gold a month. That meant that hiring him was well within my means, and I wasn't about to let talent like his pass me by.

"Understood," I said. "Five gold a month is an acceptable rate, and as such, I would be happy to form a contract with you and your men."

"You...would? Really?" said Locke. He seemed more bewildered than happy to hear the news. "Oh, that is...pardon me," he added a moment later. "It's just

that me and my men have yet to rack up much in the way of achievements. We've been turned down by one lord after another, to tell the truth. If you're really willing to hire us, well, I couldn't be happier."

Oh, so they're inexperienced? Locke's abilities seemed high, considering. I had to wonder if he'd formed his band recently.

"So long as our contract remains in effect, I solemnly swear to wield my blade for the glory of House Louvent," Locke declared with a deep bow. His demeanor didn't strike me as very mercenary-like, but then again, it wasn't unheard of for former nobles to take up the sellsword lifestyle, so that was probably just an unfounded bias on my part.

"I'll be counting on you," I replied.

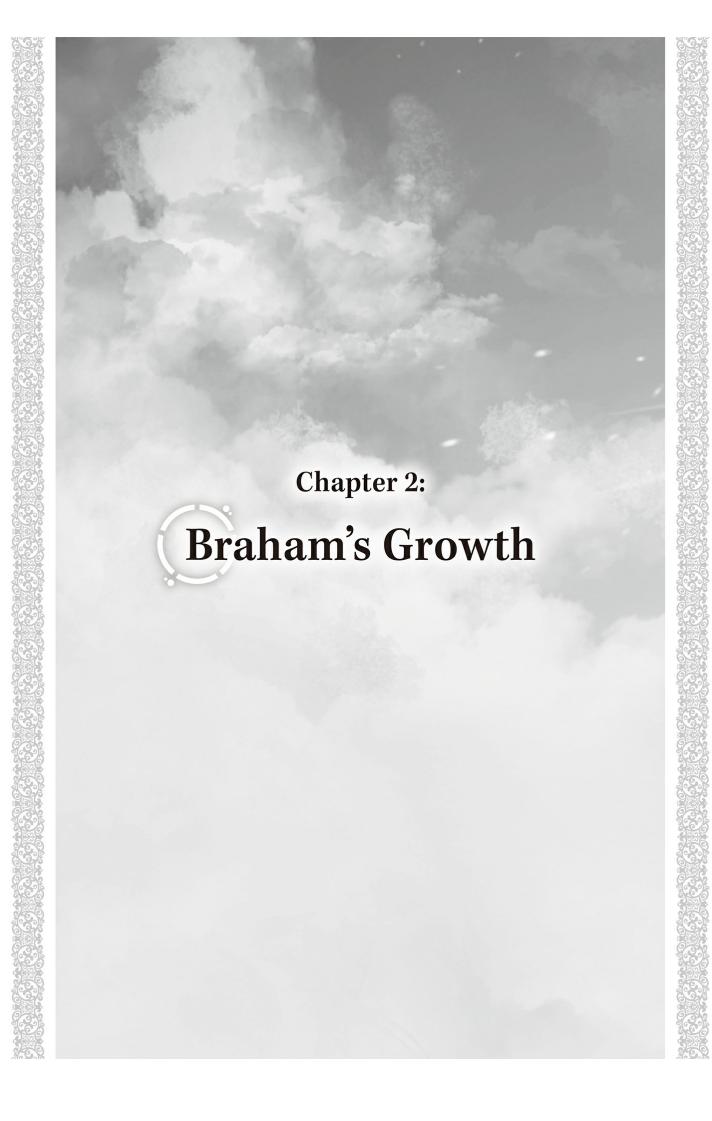
And so I formed a contract with the Bangle Mercenaries.

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Several other bands of mercenaries arrived after I brought the Bangle Mercenaries aboard, but none of them were remarkable enough for me to offer them any real consideration. In the end, the Bangles were the only group I decided to hire. I stationed them on the western side of Canarre, near the border with Seitz. The neighboring duchy was still biding its time, for the moment, but I had a feeling it wouldn't be long before they decided to prod our defenses again, and I wanted the border to be locked down when that time came.

The fact that public order had started deteriorating in the vicinity played a factor, as well. Seitz's defeat in the recent war had dealt a serious blow to their

soldiers' morale, and a fair number of deserters had begun to crop up. Some of those former soldiers turned to banditry, and the sheer size of Seitz's army meant that before long there were quite a few deserters-turned-brigands to deal with, many of whom crossed over the border into Canarre. Placing the Bangles in the west meant that they could keep the peace and watch the border all at once, which couldn't have suited me better. I had high hopes that they would prove their worth in no time flat.



A few weeks had passed since I'd hired the Bangle Mercenaries, and I'd already started receiving reports about their success in the ongoing conflict with the Seitzan bandits. I'd also continued my recruitment efforts over that span of time, and happily enough had found ten individuals with notable magical abilities, two of whom also had high Cavalry aptitudes. I was still quite a ways off from forming the mounted mage unit I was hoping to build, but that objective was drawing closer, step by step.

I found a dozen capable close-combat fighters, as well, who I assigned to Braham's elite unit of soldiers. Considering Braham's long-term potential, I knew that someday, his team could be the most capable fighting force in all of Missian. That being said, their commanding officer still had a long way to go before that potential could be realized.

As far as the short term went, I'd brought a capable squad of mercenaries into my service and found quite a few individuals to hire as well, so I decided to call my recruitment effort to a close for the time being. Overextending could put our finances in jeopardy, and I had to train up everyone who I'd already found, which would be harder and less efficient the more of them there were. I was still far from satisfied with our total numbers, but I figured that this would be a good time to pause the effort for a month or two and reassess things after my break.

The one problem with that plan was that when there wasn't any appraising for me to handle, there wasn't all that much else left on my plate. I'd delegated most of the actual management of the county to my retainers, and if I tried to jump in and help out on that end of things, I knew I'd just hold them back. I

couldn't just sit back and relax, though, and after spending some time pondering my options I decided to return to an old habit of mine: studying up on the world I'd been reincarnated into.

I'd done quite a lot of independent research when I was younger, but lately, I'd slipped out of the routine. Many of my retainers were seemingly inexhaustible wellsprings of knowledge, and there may not have been much of a point to cramming more trivia into my own brain, but on the other hand it just seemed wrong for a count to be as ignorant as I currently was.

In the past, Rietz had been responsible for teaching my lessons. He was way too busy for that now, though, and Rosell was likewise busy with his own studies and research. I couldn't ask either of them to spare time for me. I considered studying on my own—I knew I'd make better progress if I had someone to teach me, I just couldn't think of any options that would make that happen. In the end, I decided to go at it alone and shut myself up in the study to hit the books.

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"If I recall, you'll be taking today off appraisals and studying instead, yes?" asked Licia the next morning as we were preparing for the day.

"Yes, that's right," I confirmed. "I have to do something productive with my time, after all—a count can't be seen slacking off."

"In that case, I'd like to join you, if you wouldn't mind! As the wife of a count, there's plenty that I need to learn as well," said Licia. She was brimming with motivation.

Studying with her sounded great to me, and I didn't have any particular reason to refuse, so I gave her a nod. "All right, then. I'd be glad to have you accompanying me."

The two of us made our way to the castle's library together. Partway there, however, I heard a familiar voice call out to me.

"Ah, Lord Ars! Good morning!" shouted the ever-loquacious Virge. "Lovely day out, isn't it? Beautiful weather like this makes me want to drop everything, run outside, and exercise my heart out, but alas, today I must coop myself up indoors and process paperwork! A shame, such a shame!"

"O-Oh, is that so? Good luck with that," I replied.

"Come to think of it, I've heard you won't be performing any appraisals today? What will the two of you be doing instead?" Virge asked.

"We're planning on spending the day studying in the library," I replied.

"Oh, truly? How very industrious of you! Oh, I know—if you're going to study, I recommend you visit the lecture hall! Thomas has been teaching lessons there, it seems, and I'm sure he'd be happy to see you come listen to him. As a matter of fact, I believe he's running one right now!"

"Thomas is? Really?"

"Quite! Knowledge and skill go hand in hand, after all—it's a vital component of any soldier's training! Though of course, not everyone can participate. I understand that only a small number of individuals who lead their own brigades are in attendance. I can't imagine he'd turn you down, though, Your Lordship!"

This was all news to me, but it was true that being a capable leader required as much knowledge as it did martial skill. I didn't know what subjects Thomas was teaching, but considering how smart he was, I felt confident that he could

cover all sorts of fields. In any case, I didn't see the harm in checking it out for myself. I glanced at Licia, who met my gaze and gave me a nod, signaling that she was interested as well.

"Thank you for telling me about this," I said to Virge. "I'll go give it a look right away."

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We arrived in Castle Canarre's lecture hall to find that Virge had been correct, and Thomas's lesson was just about to begin.

"I don't mind if you want to sit in...but it could make things a little difficult," Thomas said when I asked if I could attend as well. It sounded like I had his approval, at least, if not his wholehearted welcome.

The lecture hall was quite large, with enough space for at least a hundred people or so to sit in, but there were only ten gathered up for the lesson at the moment. I took a seat, and Licia sat down to my right. She seemed rather excited, and I had a feeling she was quite motivated to learn. I didn't know if the subject Thomas would be teaching would be relevant to our duties, but I decided to learn from her example and apply myself as well.

Braham occupied the seat in front of me. He led a strike force of elite troops, but he was also still far from the brightest bulb in the box, so studying was of particular importance for him. Or at least, it was from my perspective—he seemed much more interested in getting back to his training.

"So, hey, does any of this stuff even matter? Can't we get back out into the field already?" Braham moaned at Thomas.

"Keep griping like that, and you'll be getting a different sort of lecture before you know it," Zaht quickly scolded from the seat next to Braham's. He'd been assigned to serve as Braham's second-in-command, and it seemed that position had caused him no small amount of stress.

"Canarre is home to a large number of individuals with great potential, but the one thing it lacks is individuals with an advanced education," said Thomas, who didn't bat an eyelash at Braham's grumbling. "It's only natural for those who lead to apply themselves to their studies. In other words: shut your mouth and listen."

I couldn't argue with that assessment. As a natural consequence of my willingness to hire anyone, irrespective of social standing, I had an unusual number of commoners in my employ. Talented as they were, they hadn't had the access to the sort of education that nobles were given. I knew that they'd pick it up quickly as long as they had someone to teach them, though.

"Yeah, Braham does need to hit the books more," said Charlotte, who was sitting to my left.

Look who's talking! I snapped internally. Charlotte hadn't been planning on attending the lecture at first. She'd only shown up because she'd learned that Licia and I would be going, and had decided on the spot that she'd tag along as well. I was no closer to getting a read on what drove her than I'd been the day we met. Musia was sitting on Charlotte's other side, by the way, though she was serious enough about her studies that she'd been planning on participating from the start.

"Braham and you both need to study up," Thomas snapped back, his face twitching with irritation.

"Wh-What, me? What are you talking about? I'll have you know I know all

sortsa stuff," said Charlotte.

"Oh, really? Then how about you list all the counties in Missian, aside from Canarre."

A lengthy pause ensued.

"Uhhh," said Charlotte, "there's the one by the ocean...S-Semplan? And then there's, uhhh... Ar... Ar... Arcantara?"

"Semplar and Arcantez," sighed Thomas. "You don't even know the name of your own duchy's capital?"

"I don't *need* to know that junk to win battles!" Charlotte confidently declared.

For a moment, Thomas's words seemed to stick in his throat. He'd had a very up close and personal experience with Charlotte's capabilities during the battle of Velshdt, and couldn't come up with a counterargument. Rather, it looked to me like he was lamenting the fact that he'd lost to a dullard like her.

"I promise you that if you don't do something to correct your lack of knowledge, it'll come back to bite you in the long run," Thomas finally said. "Let's try another question: you know all the magical aspects, right?"

"Of course I do!" said Charlotte with a smug grin. "There's the one that makes fire and the one that makes water, to start! Then there's the one that makes light, and, uhhh, the one that blows stuff up! There's one that lets you do stuff with dirt too...oh, and one that makes big noises! Hmm... Think that's all of 'em, probably?"

"That's not even close to all of them, you imbecile!" shouted Thomas.

"What, seriously?!"

"Conventional knowledge states that there are twenty aspects in total," Thomas sighed before listing them out one by one.

Apparently, the known magical aspects were sound, flame, water, shadow, explosion, steel, force, lightning, darkness, earth, light, healing, ice, wind, profane, time, illusion, spirit, wood, and knowledge. I'd studied them myself, and had thought that I'd memorized the list, but that was a long time ago and it seemed quite a few of them had slipped my mind.

"That many? For real? I've only used *five*, or something," Charlotte commented incredulously.

"It goes without saying that not all aspects are available in Missian," said Thomas. "Casting magic requires aqua magia, and creating aqua magia requires an ore known as magistones. Particular sorts of magistone, meanwhile, can only be found in certain duchies. Missian has deposits of explosion-aspected magistones, for instance, and when a duchy has the only deposits of a certain aspect to be found, they're prone to monopolizing it, strictly regulating the degree to which they're sold to other duchies. As a side note, while I claimed there were twenty aspects, those are just the known ones. It's said that there are more aspects that have yet to enter the realm of public knowledge, their very existence kept a tightly-guarded secret by those who are in the know."

I'd never heard anyone talk about secret aspects of magic before. I had to wonder if there were aspects that only the Duke of Missian's house knew about, but ruled the idea out just as quickly. After all, if that were the case then either Couran or Vasmarque would have used it during the civil war. Unless the aspect in question wasn't particularly powerful, of course, but if that were the case, then what need would there be to hide it?

"Which duchies hold a monopoly over which types of magistones, in

specific?" asked Licia.

"Missian controls the explosive magistone supply, and Seitz has a monopoly over steel," said Thomas. "I'm to understand that Seitz didn't make use of that advantage in the recent conflict. Steel-aspected magic tends to be used for defensive purposes, so I suppose they don't make a point of working it into their offensive tactics. The healing magistone supply is controlled by Paradille, time and spirit by Ansel, and profane by Scheutz. Finally, Rofeille controls illusion and force while Canshiep controls ice and knowledge."

"Should I take that to mean that the remaining ten aspects aren't monopolized by any duchy in particular?" Licia followed up.

"Right," Thomas confirmed. "That doesn't mean you can dig them up just anywhere, though. Some regions don't have access to the more common magistones. Lightning and wood-aspect magistones are a lost cause in Missian, for instance."

Licia was engaging with Thomas's lecture on a deep level. I was very impressed by her studious nature—almost as much as I was unimpressed with Charlotte's. She was the one who needed to know about the minutiae of magic more than anyone, and yet somewhere along the way she'd slumped over onto her desk and fallen asleep. If anyone needed to take a leaf out of Licia's book, it was her.

It wasn't long before Thomas noticed his unconscious pupil and let out a sigh that struck me as more tired than angry. "I suppose forcing her to learn anything past the bare minimum would be counterproductive anyway," he muttered. "You—the one next to her! Musia, was it?"

"Hyee-Y-Yes?!" squealed Musia, who had been listening intently this whole time. Thomas seemed to be staring right through her, and Musia seemed to be

so nervous, she was petrified.

"Your job's to learn as much as you possibly can and support Charlotte," said Thomas. "Consider yourself the second-in-command of our mage division."

"Oh...huh? The second-in-command?!"

"Why are you acting like this is a surprise?"

"B-Because it is! I'm still a novice! There's no way I could manage a job like that!"

"You're second only to Charlotte in terms of ability, aren't you?" said Thomas. "And even if you don't think that's true now, it will be before long. You need to study up while you can."

"Wh-Whaaat?!" Musia wailed.

Her promotion had taken her by surprise, but frankly, it had only been a matter of time before she ended up in that position. She had the talent, and while her current skills were already nothing to scoff at, they were also growing at a rapid pace. To top it all off she was studious and diligent, making her the perfect complement to her captain Charlotte's lackadaisical attitude. Charlotte, in turn, seemed to have taken quite a liking to Musia, and was very unlikely to protest her promotion.

Rietz was in charge of our military assignments. I had the ultimate right of veto, but I'd never had any cause to oppose his decisions, so for all intents and purposes Musia's rank was up to him. He seemed to have a high opinion of her, so I had a feeling that he would have put her in a position of command as she gained more experience anyway.

With that, our lesson on magic came to an end. Musia was left in a state of despair, muttering about how she now had to buckle down and study even

though she was already busy with her magic practice.

Thomas wasn't finished, though—he still had lessons on tactics and battle formations to teach. Those were areas that I generally left up to my retainers to handle, but it felt important for me to have at least a basic understanding of what to do in battle, so I listened with rapt attention. It was a given that I'd be taking those lessons seriously, but what I hadn't expected was for Licia to be just as attentive.

"I see! You can use sound magic to issue orders," Licia muttered.

"Umm... Do you really think you're ever going to need to know how to command a battle?" I asked.

"Hm...? What sort of question is that?!" Licia snapped. "I'm the wife of a count! It's possible that I'll be called upon to lead your troops, and I have to be prepared when the time arrives!"

What sort of time would that even be? I wondered, but I had a feeling she'd just get more upset if I asked her that, so I kept the question to myself.

"O-Oh, okay then," I said instead. "I'm glad to see you acting so studious."

"Hee hee! Oh, you flatter me," said Licia with a slight blush and the cutest smile in the world. "I was never taught any of these subjects back home, so this is all very enlightening! Let's study together again some time, shall we?"

"Certainly," I agreed.

Before long, Thomas's lesson came to a close.

"All right! Finally finished," Charlotte mumbled as she sat up and stretched. She'd barely listened to any of the lessons at all, yet for some reason, she was acting like she'd accomplished something.

Meanwhile, on Charlotte's other side, Musia, who'd been studying for all she was worth, looked exhausted. I had a feeling that she was going to go through a lot of hardship thanks to her captain, but considering Charlotte showed no interest in shaping up, somebody had to fill the role of supporting her. Musia had just drawn the short straw.



"All right, let's hit up the training ground," said Braham as he hauled himself to his feet.

"Understood," said Zaht, who also looked rather drained as he followed along.

Zaht had silently listened to the whole lecture, but Braham had slacked off to the bitter end. Being seated behind him had made it very easy to notice how distracted he'd been. To be clear, it didn't seem like Thomas was fooled either. He knew that Braham wasn't paying attention to him, but had given up on him.

I checked on Braham's Intelligence score, for reference, and found that it was slightly higher than before, but still sitting at an unimpressive 31. His Leadership had gone up slightly as well, bringing it to a total of 59, but that still wasn't the sort of score I'd want for someone I could give control of a large army. His Valor was as high as ever, at least, and I knew that some studying could improve his current failings, but whether or not that would happen was another question entirely.

Charlotte was just as disinterested in studying as Braham, but her overwhelming magical capabilities gave her the ability to swing the course of a battle in our favor, regardless of her personal Intelligence score. Plus, she had a remarkable sort of charisma that helped her when it came to taking command—the other mages in her division all followed her orders to the letter. Braham had no such advantage, so unless he hit the books and learned some tactics, his theoretical strongest score, his Leadership, would never reach its full potential.

If Braham himself couldn't find some motivation, there wouldn't be any improvement in his situation. I couldn't force him to study, after all—that ran the risk of angering him so much, he'd defect to another county. I couldn't afford to

let a man with talent like his go, no matter what, which meant my only choice was to watch over him and hope for the best.

As Licia and I passed by Thomas on our way out of the lecture hall, Licia briefly turned to him. "Today's lesson was very informative! Thank you, and I look forward to the next one," she said.

"You're coming again, huh...? Have it your way, I guess," replied Thomas. He seemed a little surprised that she intended to keep participating.

"Is us being here a problem?" I asked.

"Not exactly," Thomas muttered. "It makes things a bit harder, but it's nothing I can't deal with. And seeing as you got Charlotte to show up, it's not without its upsides."

"I'm glad to hear it," I replied. The fact that Charlotte had attended didn't change the fact that she hadn't paid any attention, but I supposed it was still better than her not showing up, period.

"Oh, and while we're at it, I have a question," said Thomas. "How did Braham end up in Canarre?"

"Oh, Braham?" I said. "He was one of the captive soldiers that I appraised after we won the battle of Velshdt. He had exceptional talent, so I recommended that Lord Couran try to recruit him, but in the end he requested to be sent to Canarre instead."

"Exceptional talent? Really...?" Thomas muttered skeptically. "He knows how to fight, I'll give him that much, but I heard nothing but bad rumors about him back when we were both in Velshdt."

"Oh! So, you knew him before you came here?"

"Yeah," said Thomas with a nod.

I was a little surprised. Considering how unimportant of a mission Braham had been entrusted with in Velshdt, I hadn't imagined he was well-known among its defenders.

"He was pretty famous in Velshdt, in the worst sense of the word. He was a hell of a fighter, but also a hell of an idiot—the sort of man who has no idea what to do the minute an actual battle breaks out. He managed to achieve something every once in a while, though, which earned him a fair share of admirers. That's how he ended up leading a squad in spite of everything."

"I see," I said. "It sounds like he was rather notorious, in a sense."

"I'll admit he's not as much of an idiot as I thought back then, but talented...?

Are you sure about that?"

"Absolutely. Someday, Braham will be one of the most esteemed generals in the whole Summerforth Empire."

Braham's maximum Leadership score was 102—higher even than Rietz and Mireille's. I'd appraised more people than I could count in my search for subordinates, and I'd still never met anyone with a Leadership score higher than his. With the right training and encouragement, I knew he could become the greatest general the continent had ever seen.

"A great general? Him...? That's hard to believe, but I guess we'll see how it plays out," Thomas said incredulously. Considering how much of an idiot Braham came across as, asking Thomas to believe he had that sort of potential may have been asking the impossible. Not even I could say with total certainty he'd reach his potential, considering how many difficulties he was having at the moment.

"We'll be on our way, then," I said. Licia and I bade Thomas farewell, then

returned to our room together.

0

After Thomas's lesson wrapped up, Braham headed for the training grounds along with Zaht, his second-in-command. Braham had always loved working out and made a point to train whenever he had a moment to spare. Zaht, meanwhile, made a point of accompanying him.

"Hmm," Braham murmured as they walked along. He seemed to be pondering something.

Zaht looked rather puzzled. Generally speaking, Braham wasn't the sort of person to worry—or, for that matter, think—about much of anything. He was a man who lived by his instincts, and it was a shock to see him contemplating something, particularly considering they'd only just finished their lesson for the day.

"Hey, Zaht," said Braham, "do you think there's any point to studying all that tactics junk? Because I'm pretty sure the best way to get stronger's to keep training, personally!"

Zaht paused to roll his eyes before answering Braham's question.

"Yes, I do think there's a point," he said. "The more you understand tactics, the easier it becomes to win battles. It's necessary."

"Tactics, huh? I dunno...aren't those all just cowardly tricks to get an edge on your enemy, in the end? What's the point of winning if you've gotta cheat to do it? The way I see it, real men fight head on, fair and square!"

Zaht sighed.

"Think of it this way, if you go into a winnable fight and lose because you didn't have any sort of tactical plan, then none of that fair play stuff matters anymore."

"So you just win instead!" declared Braham.

"If only it were that easy," Zaht muttered.

"What's that supposed to mean? When have I ever lost?"

"You told me yourself that Rietz beat you, didn't you?"

"Ugh!" Braham winced. "W-Well, yeah, he did...but that was a duel! I'm talking about big battles!"

"I'll grant you that you haven't been with House Louvent for long enough to have engaged in many battles yet, and you haven't lost as a result...but didn't you end up joining House Louvent in the first place because they recruited you after you lost to them?"

"Agh," Braham moaned. He couldn't argue against a verifiable fact.

Braham thought back to one of the battles he'd fought at Velshdt, before he joined House Louvent. The first image that came to mind was that of himself performing glorious, valorous deeds on the battlefield, charging straight into a force twice the size of his own and claiming the enemy leader's head in an instant. The enemy army had collapsed, and he'd even been rewarded for his service.

A grin spread across Braham's face as he basked in the memory, while Zaht cringed off to the side. It wasn't the only one, either—Braham remembered all sorts of battles in which he'd achieved great things.

"Yup, no doubt about it! I've never lost! I've turned the tide of battle over and over, and losing against Couran's army wasn't my fault at all!" Braham declared.

"Do you forget everything that doesn't match up with the ideal little world you think you live in?" sighed Zaht. "I have a feeling you've failed at least as much as you've succeeded."

"Rude! N-No way that could be true!" Braham shouted.

The old Braham would have stopped there, content to believe in his idealized memories of his achievements. The new Braham, however—the Braham who had ever so slightly matured since he arrived in Canarre—had the presence of mind to think it through just a little longer, and realize that he had committed a few minor blunders. More than a few, in fact. Remembering one had opened the floodgates, and mistake after mistake soon came back to him in rapid succession.

There was the time he'd led the vanguard in a charge only to fall into an enemy trap, ultimately causing his force to lose the battle, for instance. Then there was the time he'd disregarded his orders, broken ranks to go on the attack, and caused his army's formation to collapse. Braham had caused all sorts of trouble during his time in Velshdt, and only now was that fact sinking in.

"Ugh," Braham groaned, the color draining from his face as a terrible possibility struck him. "Hey, Zaht. I think I'm just jumping to conclusions here, but...can I ask you something?"

"Feel free," said Zaht.

"Did everyone back in Velshdt treat me like garbage...because they thought I was stupid?" asked Braham.

"Yes, most likely," Zaht replied instantly, with a look on his face that said Why

are you asking the obvious?

Braham's jaw dropped.

"You're kidding, right?"

"Wrong. I don't know much about what happened in Velshdt, but that's the only reasonable explanation I can think of."

Braham fell silent. A bead of sweat dripped down his brow as he brooded furiously.

"Hey, Zaht...?" Braham finally said. "You know all that stuff we just learned? Think you could, uhh, help me review it?"

"Certainly," said Zaht, his expression shifting to one that shouted *Thank the gods, he's finally figured it out.* 

0

Licia and I decided to attend Thomas's next lesson as well, which was once again focused on military tactics. I could tell why Thomas had been Vasmarque's most trusted advisor: he was incredibly well-versed in the subject, and taught us all sorts of practical tactics that you'd never find in written treatises.

Of course, I say practical in the sense that they *could* be used in the real world—whether or not I ever would was much more in doubt. I'd been into battle before and almost certainly would again, though, so I figured there was no harm in learning what I could, and doing my best not to forget it. Thomas apparently taught lessons not related to war sometimes as well, which I

imagined were a little more applicable to my purposes. I had a feeling he'd know all sorts of interesting tidbits that I wouldn't be able to learn from anyone else.

In any case, the lesson proceeded along, but Braham quickly caught my attention. He hadn't taken the first lesson I'd attended seriously at all—in fact, he'd barely even listened to it—but this time, he was paying careful attention. He seemed to be hanging on Thomas's every word, and was even asking questions to make sure he understood the lesson's content.

It was such a dramatic about-face in attitude that even Thomas seemed bewildered. I had a feeling he'd never seen Braham act so diligent before. Not that it was a bad thing, of course! Braham had Valor to spare, but was lacking in Intelligence, so if he'd gotten it into his head to take his studies seriously, I could only see it as a positive development. Still, I had to wonder: where had this sudden change come from?

"Did you say something to Braham?" Thomas asked, finding an opportunity to whisper to me.

"No, nothing at all," I replied.

"Really? Then why's he acting so serious all of a sudden? I can't figure out what makes him tick. Is he putting on a show to make it look like he's a decent student in front of you?"

That didn't seem right, considering he'd made no such effort the first time I attended a lesson. He'd had a change of heart since then, but what had prompted it was a mystery.

"Seeing him act like that's creeping me out, but I guess it's not a bad thing. He's better at picking things up than I expected," said Thomas.

That proved something I'd already suspected: as long as Braham listened, he wasn't bad at understanding what people told him at all. His maximum Intelligence score was reasonable enough that I'd always figured he wasn't inherently stupid.

"He's one hell of a fighter, too. If I can just drill what being on a battlefield actually means into his head, then who knows? Maybe he's got the potential to lead a unit after all. He's still worlds away from being the greatest general in all of Summerforth, though! Hah hah hah!" Thomas chuckled as he went along on his way.

A few weeks came and went, over the course of which I attended several more of Thomas's lessons. I didn't go every day, of course. It almost felt like I'd returned to my school days when I did, and I'd come to enjoy it quite a bit, but I couldn't put off resuming my appraisals and finding new people to hire forever, so I knew I'd have to call it quits before too long.

Braham was still taking his lessons seriously. Part of me had expected his shift in attitude to last for a day, at most, and I was rather impressed he'd kept it up for so long. He really had had a change of heart, it seemed, which led me to try appraising him.

Braham Joe

Age: 17

Male

## Status:

LEA: 68/102

VAL: 91/92

INT: 45/61

POL: 19/55

Ambition: 88

## Aptitudes:

Infantry: S

Cavalry: A

Archer: B

Mage: D

Fortification: C

Weaponry: D

Naval: D

Aerial: D

Strategy: D

His newfound diligence had already borne fruit, it seemed. Braham's Intelligence score was a lot higher than it had been before. 45 still wasn't an incredible score, to be sure, but it was something. His Leadership, however, was only at 68. It had gone up by much less than I'd anticipated, though upon further consideration, it struck me that Leadership was the sort of stat that improved through real-world experience leading troops on the battlefield. Just studying wasn't enough for it to improve by leaps and bounds, and the slight gains he'd achieved were impressive enough as-is.

68 was a low enough score that I was still too scared to give him control of a large army, but at the very least, it reaffirmed the potential I'd seen in him. I was starting to think that the next time a battle broke out, having him take charge of a larger squad might be for the best. His growth was encouraging, in any case, but there was just one small factor that had me worried.

"Ugggh," Braham sighed listlessly. He was usually so energetic that it was sort of a problem, but ever since he'd started taking his studies seriously, he'd seemed rather down in the dumps. I had to wonder if those facts were related, somehow. The change had been so sudden it wasn't hard to imagine something had happened to prompt it, after all...but since it had turned him into such a good student, I decided to just sit back and let it play out for the time being.

0

In a training ground in Canarre, Zaht Brouzdo was taking on his immediate superior, Braham Joe, in a five-versus-five mock battle. Magic was off the table for this engagement—they would battle with traditional weaponry alone. Zaht and Braham had each taken charge as the leaders of their five-man divisions, and commanded their soldiers with the goal of disabling the enemy leader.

"Grr," Zaht grunted with irritation. It had been a tough fight so far. Braham was all but unbeatable in single combat, and Zaht had only won a small number of one-on-one matches against him, but team bouts were supposed to be a different matter.

In the past, Braham had never bothered to give more than the simplest of orders and had spearheaded his unit's charges, in spite of the fact that his

defeat would mean the end of the match. All that Zaht typically had to do was arrange for Braham to end up facing off against several troops at once, and they could handle him. He'd still managed to claim a victory or two thanks to his exceptional level of skill, but the balance of victories still leaned in Zaht's favor when compared to their one-on-one record.

Recently, however, things had changed. Braham had become much better at keeping his cool in battle, and had stopped charging in without a plan. Moreover, he'd started being much more proactive and specific with his orders. He still made plenty of tactical blunders, but Zaht found himself hard pressed to claim a solid victory.

"All right, flank 'em!"

"Gah!"

Much to Zaht's chagrin, he realized too late that he'd left Braham's men the perfect chance to slip around behind him—a chance that Braham was quick to take advantage of. By the time Braham had given the order, it was already too late to stop it. Zaht's group was flanked, disarmed, and defeated.

"Letting the enemy get behind you puts you in a tough spot! Better be careful about that from now on!" Braham pointed out.

"Well aware, thank you," grumbled Zaht.

Braham's attitude about his victories had shifted as well. In the past, he would frolic like an ecstatic child whenever he won a match, but recently, he'd learned to keep his cool. Even now Braham had furrowed his brow, sinking into thought. As best as Zaht could tell, he was reviewing the mock battle he'd just fought.

He really has changed, thought Zaht. At first I wondered why I'd been assigned to work for an idiot kid like him, but these days, I'm starting to change my

mind...

Zaht had traveled all over the continent of Summerforth, and through his many experiences had become a rather worldly man. He fought his first battle in his early teens, having chosen to go to war because living out his days as a common peasant struck him as boring. Eventually, however, the commanding officer who led his squad chose to break away from the army and take his men with him. Zaht was living like a bandit before he knew it, and he'd realized that a situation like that could only end poorly.

After that illfated venture, Zaht took a stab at bounty hunting and spent some time as a mercenary as well. He tried out all sorts of careers, living through his fair share of battlefield massacres in the process. The number of men he'd killed had passed the point where he could count them on his fingers a long time ago, and he'd seen plenty of friends and allies meet violent ends as well.

Finally, he found himself drifting into the service of House Louvent, where he was assigned to serve as the second-in-command of an elite squad of soldiers. Compared to everything he'd been through up to that point it was a pretty cushy job, but the caveat that it involved working under Braham's command was a bitter pill to swallow. That being said, Zaht was the sort of man who found motivation in adversity. He believed that Braham's ineptitude would be exposed one day, and that when it happened, it would be the perfect chance for him to take over as the squad's new leader.

I've heard the count has some sort of power that lets him see people's talents. Never thought much of that, but maybe there's some truth to it after all, Zaht reflected. His skepticism about Ars's ability was beginning to fade. But then again, if his power is real and he decided to assign me to work under Braham, then that would mean I'm less talented than he is, right? And that would mean

that there's no chance I'll ever get to take over as captain... Though on the other hand, if Braham does turn out to have some sort of outrageous talent, then working under him might not be such a bad deal after all. As long as we can achieve enough, I might be able to move up in House Louvent's ranks, even as the second-in-command.

Zaht was a very ambitious man, but his end goal wasn't to stand at the very pinnacle of his chosen hierarchy. As long as he could climb to a somewhat high station, he could be satisfied with it.

Is Braham really that talented, though? Zaht wondered once more. He was opening up to the idea that his superior wasn't completely worthless, but he wasn't sold yet.

"Hey, Zaht...do you think I'm learning?" Braham suddenly asked.

"I'd say so," Zaht answered honestly.

"Really? Then how do you think I stack up to Rietz and Thomas these days?"

"Huh?" Zaht blinked. "Uh, well, I'd say you still have a long ways to go before you're on their level."

"I knew it," Braham muttered with a frustrated grimace. "Fighting's all I know, so I thought I could at least be the best at it...but I guess I've still gotta put more effort in," he continued, his frown taking on an edge of resolve.

The best, huh? thought Zaht. He felt a twinge of something close to envy as he watched Braham unflinchingly declare his desire to surpass all others. Zaht had been through too much to not know his own limits, and as such, those were words that he could never bring himself to speak.

"All right, let's go another round!" shouted Braham.

"Another...?" Zaht sighed. They had already fought five bouts that day alone,

with barely any time to rest in between, and Zaht was exhausted. One would think that Braham would have been just as tired, but by all appearances he was still raring to go. He was truly a man whose stamina knew no bounds.

"All right, then. Let's get to it," said Zaht. Many more matches would happen before Braham was finally satisfied.

0

One day, my retainers and I gathered up in Castle Canarre for one of our regular meetings.

"I've been thinking it's about time for me to get back to looking for more people to recruit. Does anyone have any objections?" I asked, kicking the discussion off.

"None. I believe that would be for the best," Rietz agreed immediately. "We have the financial leeway to bring more people aboard, and as Canarre's population rises, so too does the workload involved in managing the county. Frankly, we could use the help."

"Think you could send a few people my way, this time? Lamberg's population's been on the rise too, and I've had a lot more problems to deal with," chimed in Mireille.

"Haven't you already delegated the better part of your responsibilities as the baron?" I asked.

"Nah," she replied. "That's the thing—there've been so many issues that I've had to handle a ton of the petty stuff myself. If you can get me someone who has what it takes to handle all that junk lickety-split for me, that'd be great."

Come to think of it, I guess Mireille has been paying a lot fewer visits to Castle Canarre as of late. Maybe that's why?

"I suppose sending a few people your way wouldn't be an issue," I began, only for Rietz to jump in and cut me off.

"You mustn't, Lord Ars. Mireille's goal is to reduce her own workload as far as she can manage. If she wishes to remain the Baron of Lamberg, then it's only natural for her to deal with the bulk of the barony's concerns. If there's any problem with the current state of Lamberg, it's that she *hasn't* been carrying out that sort of duty up until now. If she finds herself doing everything she can and still fails to address all of the barony's concerns, *then* you should consider granting her new personnel," said Rietz. He had a point, and everyone knew it.

"O-Okay, but if the workload keeps growing at the rate it has been, it's only a matter of time before it's too much! Might as well plan ahead, right...?" Mireille interjected hopefully.

"If the workload becomes too much for you, feel free to raise the issue in a future meeting," said Rietz.

"Y-You know, when you put it that way, it might be getting to that point already...? I can't handle all the work on my plate alone, so if you could send just one or two—"

"If you're going to lie to us, at least put effort into your deception," Rietz snapped. Mireille's desperation was honestly kind of hard to watch, so I appreciated him shutting her down.

"C-Come on, kiddo, cut me a break! How's a girl supposed to drink her evenings away when she has so much *work* to do?!" Mireille shouted, turning to me and giving up on trickery entirely.

Needless to say, the fact that she was telling the truth now didn't make me feel any more inclined to humor her than I had been before.

"We'll shelve Mireille's request for support for the time being, then," I said.

The shock on Mireille's face was palpable.

"Hmph! Fine, then. Guess I'll just have to run the people I already have through the grinder until they can deal with it all on their own," she grumbled to herself.

"Just don't go too crazy on them, okay?" I cautioned. I had a bad feeling how things would shape up if I left her to her own devices. "So then, moving along, does anyone have anything else to report?"

"As a matter of fact, yes," said Rietz. "We've received reports of a group of bandits that have made their way into the County of Canarre. A number of raids have been reported already. I believe that we should address the issue with all due haste."

"Bandits?" I repeated.

"Indeed," said Rietz. "It seems the bulk of their numbers are made up of former Seitzan soldiers. In other words, they're experienced fighters and are much more dangerous than your typical brigands on an individual basis. Moreover, their numbers are nothing to scoff at. It seems likely that taking half-hearted measures against them would cost us dearly, so I propose that we dispatch a large, capable band of troops to eliminate them."

The standard practice when bandits started making trouble within the county's borders was to send the army to take care of them. The fact that Rietz was raising the matter as a proposal in a meeting rather than handling it as a matter of course told me that when he said the bandits' numbers were

considerable, he wasn't kidding. That told me, in turn, that whoever was leading them was quite capable. Rietz was right—this didn't sound like an enemy we could afford to underestimate, and we couldn't let a group that dangerous run rampant for long. We'd have to take care of them quickly.

I considered sending Mireille or Rietz, since they were such capable commanders. Giving them a relatively large force to lead would solve the issue in no time, surely...but then my gaze fell upon Braham, who was also in attendance. Something was different about him this meeting. Normally, he would've been the first person to throw his hand into the air and volunteer for the job, but this time he was just sitting there, listening to the exchange.

Thanks to Braham's recent diligence when it came to his studies, he had matured. That said, he still had a ways to go. His Intelligence had grown by leaps and bounds, but his Leadership was still stalled out. I had a feeling that no amount of book learning would help it, either—he had to get out there and get some real-world experience in order to improve further. It seemed to me that he'd found himself in something of a growth spurt, which meant that giving him some battlefield experience might be for the best. His squad of elite troops had grown recently, as well, and I wanted to get some perspective on just how capable they were.

"I would like to entrust the extermination of the bandits to Braham. Does anyone object?" I said.

"Huh?" Grunted all of my retainers in unison. Even Braham's eyes were wide with shock.

"Umm... Might I ask for your rationale in choosing him, Lord Ars?" asked Rietz, apprehension written all over his face.

"Braham's skills have improved dramatically, and although these bandits may

be a difficult foe to deal with, I'm confident he has what it takes to win," I explained. "I'd also like to give his unit a test and see if they're as elite as we hope they are."

"But, nevertheless... Doesn't this task call for someone like me or Mireille, who—"

"You're already busy, aren't you? And Mireille was just complaining about her workload a moment ago."

"Right?! Quit trying to dump even more work on my head, you!" Mireille cut in, quick to shut down any attempt to entrust her with the job. "And, I mean, why not give it to him? The kiddo sure seems to think Braham's up to snuff, so might as well let him take a shot at it."

"You have a point, I suppose," Rietz conceded. His trust in my eye for talent convinced him to drop the argument.

"Wait a moment! Do you really mean you want me to do this?!" Braham shouted just as I was about to declare the matter settled. His tone was as aggressive as ever, but I noted that his word choice, at least, seemed just a little more polite than usual.

"Do you not want the job?" I asked.

"No, I didn't say that...but, well," Braham replied, then hesitated for a moment.

It was an odd reaction, coming from a man who tended to have an excess of confidence in his own capabilities. His attitude really did seem to have gone through a major shift.

A few seconds of silence later, he seemed to make up his mind. "Understood. Please leave the elimination of the bandits to me!" Braham declared.

After we determined that Braham would be handling the bandit problem, the rest of the meeting moved on without a hitch. We weren't facing any other major issues at the moment, it seemed, so it wasn't long before we wrapped up and I began to head back to my room to take a break. As I walked along, though, a voice rang out behind me.

"Why did you pick me to take care of the bandits?"

I turned around to find Braham standing behind me.

"Because I thought you could handle it," I replied.

"But that doesn't make sense!" said Braham. "I've been doing a lot of studying lately, and it's made me realize that I've been fighting like a total lunatic my whole life. I could probably deal with a few small-time bandits, no problem, but this is supposed to be a dangerous band, right? I don't know if I can handle them..."

With that, I understood what had prompted the change in Braham's attitude. All it had taken was a little studying to make him realize how inexperienced he was. Doing so had dealt a fatal blow to his confidence.

And yet, he had agreed to take on the task. Clearly he'd realized that he'd grown, on some level—I just had to find the right thing to say to him to give him the encouragement he needed. I considered my words carefully, then spoke up once more.

"The fact that you've learned to reflect on your mistakes is proof that you've grown," I said. "I'll admit that up until recently, I had too many apprehensions to assign you to a task like this. As you are now, however, I'm confident you can handle it."

"But-"

"You've been applying yourself to your tactical studies, haven't you?"

"I've been studying, yeah, and I memorized a bunch of stuff, but I've never used any of it for real..."

"But you can. You have the talent and ability to put everything you've learned about leadership into practice. I guarantee it."

Braham fell silent.

"Your second-in-command, Zaht, is a capable man as well," I added. "If you end up not knowing what to do, you can just ask him for help and it'll turn out just fine. I think you already know this, but the troops I've assigned to you are Canarre's finest."

For a few moments longer, Braham didn't say a word. Finally, he looked me in the eye.

"Understood! I'll give it a try!"

The look on his face told me that he'd gotten over his hesitation. Braham sprinted out of the castle at top speed, and I felt safe knowing that I wouldn't have to worry about him this time.

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After receiving his orders to deal with the bandits, Braham wasted no time in gathering up his troops.

"Orders from the count!" he said. "We're heading out to mop up some bandits! Get ready, men—we're giving this mission everything we have, and then

some!"

"Bandits?" one of the soldiers scoffed.

"Sounds like a walk in the park," commented another.

None of Braham's soldiers seemed concerned about their task. This was far from the first time they'd been ordered to take care of brigands that had been causing trouble in the county, and usually, they'd found themselves stronger and better-armed than the foes they faced. They had yet to meet bandits that posed a real challenge.

"It won't be so easy this time!" Braham shouted. "We're not dealing with just any bandits—these are former Seitzan soldiers, and there are a lot of them! Brace yourselves for a real fight, because that's what we're gonna get!"

That declaration gave Braham's soldiers at least a little pause. He waited for just a moment, then continued. "The enemy's holed up in northwestern Canarre. They've taken control of an abandoned fort, and are using it as their headquarters."

"A fort?" said one of Braham's soldiers. "Abandoned or not, that means they'll be in a solid defensive position—and there are a lot of them, on top of it? This might be rough."

"Right," said Braham. "First things first...we'll need information on the enemy, so we'll send out scouts to get a lay of the land."

A look of surprise came across the faces of every one of Braham's men. Gathering information was the most basic of tactical common sense...and was also something that Braham hadn't bothered to do at all for as long as they had known him. Typically, his tactic of choice had been to charge first and ask questions never. His soldiers were aware that he'd taken a studious turn, but

they had all been under the impression that he wouldn't change so quickly. This came as quite the surprise to them.

Braham chose several soldiers to serve as scouts, and sent them off to survey the bandits' fort.

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A few days later, the scouts returned to report on the bandits' stronghold. It seemed that the former Seitzan soldiers had been hard at work, and had restored the fort's defensive capabilities to some extent. Worse still, there were even more of them than initial reports had suggested. They weren't just a band of ex-soldiers anymore—they'd taken in some of Canarre's homegrown brigands as well, along with a number of has-been mercenary bands. Their force was growing stronger by the day.

In terms of weaponry, the former soldiers were reasonably well-equipped, but the bandits that had joined them later on didn't have much in the way of fine arms and armor. In addition, the scouts hadn't sighted a single mage among the enemy's number. If they had the capacity to use magic then Braham's squad would have very little hope of dealing with them alone—they would have had no choice but to call in reinforcements.

"Good work, men!" said Braham after his scouts concluded their report.

"There sure are a lot of them, though, aren't there...?"

"Maybe we should ask for some support?" suggested Zaht.

"Hmm..."

Braham lapsed into thought. If the enemy's numbers were too great for his

men to deal with, then requesting backup was his only choice. Braham, however, didn't think that things had reached that point—they were formidable, yes, but not unbeatable.

"The enemy's tougher than we anticipated, but not so tough that we can't take 'em," Braham finally said. "Not like they'll be pelting us with spells or anything, right? The count gave me this mission personally, too, so we can't crawl back to him and ask for another troop to lend us a hand."

"Isn't this also an important enough mission that we can't risk failing?" noted Zaht.

"Yeah, but think about it—bringing in reinforcements means spending more money and using up more provisions to get the task done. It'd take time to get the other troops ready, too, which means we wouldn't be able to chase them as quickly. We can't let an operation of this scale stick around for any longer than we have to."

"That's true, I suppose," Zaht conceded, still sounding rather worried.

"If I thought we couldn't take 'em no matter what, I'd give in and say that we should ask for help...but I doubt it's that far out of hand yet. You wouldn't want to betray the count's expectations by running back to him, whining about how we can't beat that many bandits, and asking for backup, would you?"

Zaht found himself unable to dispute Braham's logic. He was just as invested in maintaining their squad's elite reputation as Braham was, and knew that in the worst case, failing to show results could get him removed from his position as second-in-command, shutting off his path up the ranks.

"Understood. Guess I was being too cautious," Zaht said, throwing his weight behind Braham's plan. "I have to say, though—you're using your brain a lot more today than usual."

"H-Hey, are you calling me an idiot?! I'm over that, and you know it!" Braham shouted. Zaht's casual jab had touched a nerve. "We're not charging in without a plan this time, if I have anything to say about it! We're working out some tactics, and following them to the letter!"

"Tactics?" repeated Zaht. "Feel like cluing us in on the specifics?"

"I, uh," Braham began, then faltered. "We'll figure that out right now, as a team!"

"Guess I shouldn't have expected you to mature *that* much overnight," Zaht sighed, though internally, he admitted to himself that Braham not wanting to charge in without a plan was a sign that he'd grown quite a bit already. "These bandits are building up their numbers, right? Seems they've done it rather quickly, too, so I'm guessing they're taking in anyone and everyone who comes their way."

"I'd say so, yeah," Braham agreed. "They wouldn't have been able to recruit that many people that fast otherwise."

"Well, the way I see it, that means they aren't putting much effort into checking the backgrounds of the people they recruit—and that means that it wouldn't be hard for us to slip an infiltrator into their ranks."

Braham blinked.

"Oh...oh! I get it! We can send in spies to turn the battle in our favor when it breaks out! Let's do it!" he shouted, latching onto Zaht's proposal without a second thought.

"Huh? No, wait," said Zaht. "I know I'm the one who came up with the idea, but a mission like that would be dangerous, not to mention difficult. Shouldn't

we give this a little more thought before we settle on it?"

"Hmph... Right, fair enough," said Braham. "Infiltrating the enemy's ranks would be dangerous, yeah. Maybe we should send in someone who's tough enough to make a break for it and survive if things go south...? All right, I've got it! I'll infiltrate the enemy's fort!"

"You'll what?!" Zaht shouted in horror.

"I'm the best fighter in our whole squad, so if things get dangerous, I'm the one who's most likely to make it out alive!" Braham explained.

"You're also our captain!" shouted Zaht. "This isn't the sort of mission you can send a commanding officer on! And while I'll admit that you have the highest odds of surviving if the mission goes wrong, we should be sending whoever has the highest odds of making the mission go *right*!"

"What, are you saying I wouldn't be able to pull it off?" asked Braham.

"Yes," Zaht flatly replied. "You're the last person I'd trust to make it into the enemy camp without raising any alarms."

"Ugh!" Braham grunted, unable to deny it.

"I should be the infiltrator," said Zaht.

"Huh? No, wait, you're my second-in-command! You can't just-"

"You were prepared to send yourself—the captain—just a moment ago, so I don't want to hear it. I'm sure you'll be able to manage without your second-in-command around, and I may not let it show, but I've run with some pretty tough outfits in the past. Sneaking into a bandit camp's a task I'm well-suited for."

"But it'll be dangerous!"

"I know it will, but I give myself decent odds of making it out if worse comes to worst and I have to run. Plus, pulling off a task like this could convince the count to give me a personal reward, when all's said and done."

"I-Is that seriously what you're aiming for...?" asked Braham.

"Yes," replied Zaht with the slightest of smirks.

"All right, have it your way. The job's yours," said Braham.

"Consider it done," replied Zaht. "That said, this will be hard to pull off if I'm going it alone. May I select a few other troops to infiltrate the fort with me?"

"Go right ahead," said Braham.

Zaht picked out a number of soldiers to accompany him, then set off on his mission without delay.

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The northwest regions of Canarre were once host to a large mine. Near that mine was a town in which its workers had lived. Given the mine's importance to the county, a fort and walls had even been raised to protect the town. When the deposits of ore ran dry, however, the mine lost its significance and the fort was abandoned. It remained that way for many years, all but forgotten...but now, it was as bustling as it had ever been. The fort had been occupied by bandits, who had turned it into their personal citadel.

Zaht approached the fort with four soldiers he'd chosen accompanying him. They were all clad in the sort of worn and ragged clothing you'd expect from bandits, and Zaht had gone out of his way to choose men with surly,

intimidating appearances. You'd never think they were anything other than a gang of brigands.

A pair of guards stood before the fort's front gate. Zaht approached them without hesitation, and it wasn't long before the guards noticed him and his crew.

"Who the hell're you people?!" shouted one of the guards, doing his best to intimidate Zaht and his men.

"This is Lord Vigo's domain!" added the other.

"Yeah, well I've got business with Lord Vigo," replied Zaht. This was the first time he'd heard of the man, but he did his best to make it sound like he was in the know.

"What sorta business?" asked one of the guards.

"Me and my crew were running in the mountains 'round Paradille until their army raided our hideout. We lost most of our gang and the hideout along with 'em, and we've been on the run ever since, till we heard about this place," said Zaht, going far out of his way to sound much gruffer than he would ever speak under normal circumstances.

"What, so you wanna join us?" asked a guard.

"Right," Zaht confirmed.

"Well sorry, pal, but we're full up. Lord Vigo's decided that we're not takin' in anyone else, unless they've got some real major skills to offer. Go find some other crew to take your sorry hides in."

That wasn't the reaction that Zaht had expected, but he didn't so much as flinch. "Doesn't sound like that's gonna be necessary," he said. "You want skills, we've got 'em. If you need men who can swing a sword like the best of 'em,

then you need us."

"Oh, well aren't you a big talker," said one of the guards.

"Yeah, and I'll bet you he's *all* talk," the other said with a sneer. The two of them burst into laughter.

"All right, have it your way. We'll prove it," said Zaht.

"Prove it how?"

"I'll take on the both of you. Two on one. You can feel free to come at me like you mean to kill me, but I don't wanna go making any enemies here, so I'll be sure to leave you alive. If I live, then you know we're your men. That work for you?"

"The hell're you talking about, pal?"

"Not good enough? In that case, we'll say that I only pass if I can take the both of you out within ten seconds. How about that?"

At that, the guards' brows furrowed with anger.

"Oh, so that's how it's gonna be? Think you can make fun of us?" spat one of the guards.

"You'll be a corpse ten seconds from now!" shouted the other.

The two guards drew the short swords they carried at their waists. Zaht was carrying a blade as well, but he didn't bother to reach for it.

"What're you waiting for?! Draw!" shouted one of the guards.

"I said I wasn't going to kill you, didn't I? Why would I use a sword?" said Zaht. "Don't worry–I can handle you two just fine without one."

"You've got one hell of a death wish, moron!"

By that point, the guards were frothing mad. They leaped at Zaht simultaneously, but their movements were sluggish and uncoordinated. Zaht could see through their attacks with ease, and dodged them without wasting a single movement before delivering a heavy elbow strike to one of the guards' jaws. The guard slumped to the ground, his brain addled by the blow.

The other guard was taken aback for just long enough for Zaht to slip in a jab to his face, knocking him off balance. He took that chance to send a kick at the guard's sword arm, nailing him in the elbow. The guard's grip went slack, and his sword fell to the ground, only for Zaht to scoop it up and press its blade to the disarmed bandit's throat.

"I'd call this my win, huh?" said Zaht.

"Ugh," the guard groaned, then clicked his tongue. "Fine! We'll take you to Lord Vigo."

To the guards' credit, they acknowledged their defeat and let Zaht's band into the fort. As they passed inside Zaht noted that the bandits had put some work into restoring the place. Although they hadn't managed to bring it anywhere close to the standards of a newer structure, it was still better than one would expect from a typical bandit hideout. Ordinarily, bandits lived in ramshackle hovels that they built themselves or impromptu lodgings set up in caves. It was very rare for any to be found living in proper structures like this.

As the guards led Zaht to Vigo, he mulled over the details of his mission. His first task was to make his way into the fort and convince the bandits to accept him and his men into their numbers. Then, when night fell, they would make their way to the fort's front gate and watchtower, take out all the bandits on guard duty, then wait in the watchtower until the rest of Braham's force arrived, at which point they would open the gate. The final result: a surprise

attack in the dead of night. The bandits would be caught asleep and unprepared.

For a normal band of brigands, that would be all it would take to deal with the issue once and for all. These, however, were former Seitzan soldiers. Even if caught off guard and asleep, the odds were good they would still put up some amount of resistance. As such, Zaht's other objective was to assassinate their leader, Vigo, if the opportunity arose. Without a leader to command them, the bandits would be unable to coordinate a defense against the surprise attack, fall into confusion, and put up very little resistance.

There were plenty of dangers involved in carrying out an assassination, so Zaht would only make an attempt if the perfect opportunity presented itself. Even if he couldn't take out their leader, the surprise attack would put Braham's force at an advantage. However experienced and capable of coordinating a defense Vigo was, the odds would still be in Braham and Zaht's favor. If attempting an assassination would run a substantial risk of blowing Zaht's cover, then it just wasn't worth it.

Around the time Zaht finished mulling over the plan, Vigo came into sight. He was a large, muscular man with an unkempt beard and messy hair to match. He also wore equipment that had come from the Seitzan army, meaning he was likely a former soldier.

"Who're they?" asked Vigo.

"New blood. They say they wanna work for you," said one of the guards.

"Huh?" Vigo grunted. "Thought I told you that we already have enough people. Or, what, are you saying these ones would be useful?"

"Seems like. We came at one of them two on one, and he did us both in... It

looks like they've got what it takes."

"That so?" said Vigo, sizing up Zaht and his men with a look of interest. "You—what're you called?" he asked Zaht.

"Rubius," said Zaht. His real name hadn't spread far and wide across the county, but considering he was dealing with former Seitzan soldiers there was a small but real possibility they'd heard of him. Using a false name would prevent that from being a problem.

"So you're tough, Rubius," said Vigo. "Well then, why bother working for me? Don't tell me you're planning on bumping me off and taking my place?"

"Hate to say it, but I'm not that much of a risk-taker," said Zaht. "Judging by the rumors I've heard, I figure that working for you will keep things nice and stable for me, at least for now. With a fort like this to hole up in, even if the army of Canarre sets its sights on you, they won't be able to run you out of the county that easily."

"Hmph," Vigo snorted derisively. "You're pretty boring for a tough guy, huh? Gotta hand it to you, though—if that's what you're after, you've picked the right place. If you don't have anywhere else to go, then suit yourself. You're free to stick around here for now."

Zaht had earned Vigo's approval so easily, it was almost disappointing. That, perhaps, explained why his force had grown so large in such a short amount of time—he was apparently a very accepting person.

"We owe you one. If anyone decides to pick a fight, you can count on us defending you on the front lines," Zaht lied.

"But seriously, though—why come to us, of all places?" asked Vigo. "If you're that tough, why not give up on the outlaw life, join an army somewhere, and

move up in the world?"

"If I could find an army that'd take in a bandit like me, I'd do it in a heartbeat," Zaht replied.

"Oh? Well, I was in Seitz's army up until just a few months back, and I was a raider right up until I joined them. Climbed pretty high up in the ranks before I jumped ship, too. Look in the right places, and you'll find a legit outfit that'll take you in," said Vigo.

"If you were climbing the ranks, then how'd you end up going back to banditry?" asked Zaht.

"Stuff happened," said Vigo. "The noble I was working for lost a battle, and most of his money along with it. Folks like me who'd been brought in from outside were the first to be let go, and that left me without any other options. He was nice enough to tell me about this fort, at least, so I've gotta give the guy some credit."

"Oh? That explains a lot," Zaht muttered to himself.

The fact that a Seitzan leader had told Vigo about the fort struck him as significant. Maybe it was an act of compassion on Vigo's former commander's part...or maybe he had less benevolent intentions. Sending a group of former soldiers to live in an abandoned fort in Canarre seemed like a surefire way to sow chaos in the fort's vicinity. Maybe it had been an attempt at getting payback for Seitz's defeat, or maybe it had been an attempt to weaken the county in preparation for another, more successful invasion.

One way or another, I'll have to tell Rietz about this as soon as I get the chance, thought Zaht. The thought that bringing back important strategic information would raise his standing with his superiors almost brought a smile

to Zaht's face, but he held it back.

"Yeah, can't say I like the thought of putting my life on the line, then getting cut loose the second the coffers run dry. I think I'm more suited for the bandit life," said Zaht.

"Heh! Suit yourself," Vigo scoffed.

Zaht and his men were given a tour through the fort. They hadn't roused any suspicion, and had blended in with the rest of the bandits in no time at all.

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Meanwhile, Braham and his men lurked in a forest near the fort where they'd set up camp, careful not to let the bandits discover them.

"It looks like Zaht's crew's made it in!" reported a scout who'd been sent out to watch over the fort.

"Great! Now we just have to wait for night to fall, keep an eye on the fort, and rush in the moment we see them take out the people on watch," said Braham.

"Yes, sir! I'll head back to keep lookout on the fort right away!"

Once the guards had been eliminated, Zaht and his infiltrators would send a signal to Braham's unit. They were under strict orders to flee if the bandits caught on and the mission was compromised—after all, they could always come back with a new plan of attack in the event this one failed.

A few hours passed by, and the sun sank below the horizon. Braham's unit prepared themselves for battle, knowing the order to move out could come at any time.

Eventually, the scout that had been sent out returned once more. "They've sent the signal!" he reported to Braham.

"All right! Let's move out, men!" Braham ordered.

At that command, Braham's elite unit began to depart. They crept through the forest, silently but swiftly making their way toward the fort.

It wasn't long before they'd made it to the fort's immediate vicinity. As they drew closer, the front gate creaked open.

"Let's do this! Charge!" Braham said, then led his troops into the fort.

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After taking down the bandits' lookouts with ease, Zaht and his men settled in to wait for Braham and the others to arrive. In the meantime, Zaht considered his options.

These bandits are less prepared than I expected. I guess having a defensible base of operations made them let their guards down? Still, it's hard to believe they let total outsiders have free rein of the place the very same day they showed up.

It seemed that the bandits had never even considered the possibility that anyone would try to infiltrate their fort.

If they're this open to attack, then maybe assassinating Vigo would be worth the risk after all. I'm sure we'll win one way or another, if the surprise attack works out, but if he manages to rally a defense we might suffer more casualties than we have to. It seemed like he knew what he's doing, but if I can catch him asleep in bed, he won't stand a chance.

Zaht informed the rest of his crew that he was going to attempt the assassination they'd planned, then set out without delay, descending the watchtower and making his way into the fort proper. Vigo, he knew, would be sleeping in the chamber where they'd first met him.

Zaht crept along silently, and made his way to Vigo's chamber without being spotted. The room had a door, but that door wasn't locked. Zaht pushed the door open and slipped into the chamber. He stepped toward the bed, where he was expecting to find Vigo...and was surprised to instead find it empty.

An instant later, Zaht realized that he wasn't alone in the room. He spun about to look behind him, and backstepped just in time to dodge the axe that had swung down at him from overhead. It had happened so quickly that it left Zaht shaken, his heart pounding like a drum, but he kept himself under control and didn't lose his composure. He'd been through enough battles to collect himself in a fraction of a second.

"Oh? Nice reflexes. Didn't think you'd dodge that one," said the man with the axe: none other than the bandits' leader, Vigo himself. "Lemme guess, someone put a price on my head and you're hoping to collect, right? You smell like a bounty hunter, and I've got a good instinct about these things!"

Relief washed over Zaht. This was not, it seemed, the worst-case scenario. If Vigo thought he was a bounty hunter, then he hadn't figured out that he was with the army of Canarre, and the mission hadn't been compromised after all. Braham's sneak attack would still come as a total surprise.

"If you knew all along, then why'd you let me in your fort?" growled Zaht, playing along with Vigo's misapprehension.

"Easier to act like my guard's down and take you out when you have a go at me than play the long game," said Vigo. "Missed my chance to finish you in one attack, but still beats having you stalking me for days on end. If you let bounty hunters hang around for too long, they have a way of making you regret it. Speaking of, looks like your flunkies aren't joining us. They on lookout duty, or something?"

"Wouldn't you like to know?" Zaht said with a glare. The truth, of course, was that his allies were still up in the watchtower, waiting for the rest of Braham's squad to arrive.

"Suit yourself," said Vigo. "You're the leader, I can tell that much, so once you're dead it'll be easy enough to mop up your bounty hunter friends. Hear that, boys? Come out and say hello!"

At Vigo's prompting, a cluster of bandits emerged from a variety of hiding places in the room. Zaht's eyes darted back and forth as he assessed the situation. He counted five bandits that had been waiting for the signal—six foes in total, including Vigo.

"You're a pretty tough guy," said Vigo, "but I bet you're not tough enough to bring down a half dozen of us, eh?"

Zaht silently drew his sword.

I've been backed into a corner plenty of times, but I don't think I've ever been in this bad of a predicament before, he thought to himself. In spite of the knowledge that he could be dead in a matter of seconds, his mind was clear. The ability to keep calm when worse came to worst was part of how he had survived for as long as he had.

I can't win this on my own...but I can buy time. If I can just hold out until the

captain shows up, he'll mop up whatever's left of them for me. Can't say I like the idea of having him bail me out...but then again, this isn't the old captain we're talking about. The way he's been acting these days, I can put up with it.

Firm in his belief that Braham would save him, Zaht threw himself into battle with the bandits.

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"By the way, where's Zaht?" Braham asked after meeting up with the soldiers that had accompanied Zaht in his infiltration.

"He went off to take out the bandits' leader, Vigo," the soldier replied.

"He did? How long ago was that?"

"Right after we dealt with the lookouts, so it's been a pretty long while now."

"I have a bad feeling about this... All right! We're heading for wherever this Vigo person's likely to be first!" Braham ordered.

The soldiers who'd infiltrated the fort knew where Vigo's chamber was, so Braham got a detailed description of the path there, then headed into his fort with the rest of his men. That many soldiers tromping through the fort was impossible to conceal, of course, and one of the bandits woke up due to the noise and came out to investigate...only to run face-first into Braham's whole troop. The bandit's eyes widened, and he spun about to flee. Clearly he'd realized in an instant that he couldn't take on that many invaders on his own, and was hoping to alert his leader that they were under attack.

"He's getting away! Bring him down!" Braham ordered one of his nearby men,

who was carrying a bow. His force was composed not only of skilled swordsmen and spearmen, but expert archers as well.

The soldier Braham had singled out loosed an arrow that flew true, piercing the bandit straight through the back of his head and killing him.

"Nice work!" said Braham.

He and his men made their way deeper into the fort, dealing with any bandits who noticed them as quickly as possible to ensure the element of surprise wouldn't be compromised yet. Thankfully, Braham's archers were in peak condition and didn't let a single bandit escape them. Progress was steady, and before long, Braham and his men found themselves before the door to Vigo's chamber.

Braham immediately noticed a voice from inside the room.

"You're one persistent son of a bitch, you know that?! Tell you what—throw down your sword, and I promise I'll make your death quick and painless! You're only making this harder for all of us by drawing it out!"

The clash of metal on metal rang out a moment later. It seemed someone was fighting inside. Vigo had been so preoccupied by his battle with Zaht that Braham's incursion had gone unnoticed.

Braham burst through the door without a moment's delay. Within the chamber he found Zaht, wounded but still standing, as well as the bandits who had engaged him. The bandits, meanwhile, took immediate notice of Braham and of the soldiers behind him a second later. Looks of dazed incomprehension came across their faces—apparently, they couldn't keep up with the sudden development.

"Graaah!" Braham shouted as he charged into the room and thrust his spear

toward Vigo's chest. It had happened so quickly that Vigo had no time to react. He didn't even try to dodge, and the spear pierced straight through his heart.

"What-ugh," Vigo grunted, then coughed up blood and collapsed to the floor. He'd been struck down before he could even figure out what had happened to him. Braham's men streamed in behind him and made short work of the remaining bandits as well.

"Zaht! You okay?!" Braham shouted as he rushed to Zaht's side.

"I'm fine. Just scratches," said Zaht, who seemed unbothered by the wounds he was covered in.

Upon a second inspection, Braham realized that it was true—each of the cuts was shallow and superficial. Zaht had skillfully fended off the bandits, dodging the bulk of their attacks without sustaining any severe injuries. However, enough scratches still added up. He'd lost quite a bit of blood, and was hardly in great condition.

"What were you thinking?! You nearly got yourself killed!" shouted Braham.

"I wouldn't die that easily," grunted Zaht. "And more importantly, the guy you just killed was the bandits' leader, Vigo. With him out of the picture, we have this in the bag. Chasing them down's going to be a hassle, though, so let's get this battle underway before they have the chance to make a break for it."

"Yeah, you sure made taking care of this guy easy enough—thanks for keeping him occupied!" said Braham. "Okay, men! Let's mop up the rest of these bandit scumbags!"

At Braham's order, the fight to reclaim the fort and eliminate the bandits that remained within began. Though, it was hardly a fight at all. Without Vigo to command them, the bandits proved incapable of coping with Braham's surprise

attack. He and his soldiers swept through the fort with ease, encountering almost nothing in the way of serious resistance.

"You've already lost! Give up now, and we'll spare your lives!" Braham declared as the battle reached its final stages.

The bandits' numbers had thinned dramatically, and those who remained had no hope of turning the tide. The desperation that came over them when they realized there was nowhere to run led to them putting up more of a fight than expected. Braham saw that his force was suffering losses, and decided to offer the bandits the chance to surrender in an effort to bring the fighting to an end before his casualties started piling up.

In a battle with soldiers who fought to protect their lord or their homes, you could be all but certain your foes would fight to the death. Bandits, however, held no such scruples and valued their lives above all else. The moment surrender was offered as an option, they threw down their weapons without hesitation.

And so, in the span of a single night, the fort was stormed and the bandit gang that had settled within it was annihilated.

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Braham and his squad soon found themselves on the road to Castle Canarre, apprehended bandits in tow.

"Thanks for bailing me out, Captain. I wouldn't have made it if you'd arrived even a minute later," said Zaht. He'd been given first-aid on the spot, and had bandages wrapped around him. You'd think he would have been in

extraordinary pain, but he seemed nonplussed by his situation.

"What kinda captain wouldn't come running when one of his men's in a tight spot? Anyway, I'm just glad this went as well as it did!" Braham replied.

"The question is, will I receive a bonus for my work this time...?" Zaht muttered to himself.

"Who knows?" Braham said, then paused. "Wait. Is *that* why you ran off to take out Vigo on your own?"

"I can't believe you'd even imply such a thing. I did it to take pressure off the rest of the squad and minimize our casualties, of course. Any reward would just be a fringe benefit."

"Oh, really ...?"

"Yes, really," Zaht insisted in a complete deadpan.

Braham seemed less than convinced. "Well, you did make a huge difference this time, I guess," he sighed. "Don't worry—I'll be sure to tell Rietz and the count about all of it."

"Thank you for that," Zaht said, still unperturbed. "Oh, that reminds me. I have a piece of potentially concerning information for you to pass on to Rietz, while you're at it."

"What's that?"

"Vigo used to be a Seitzan soldier, as you know, but it seems things run a little deeper than we thought. Apparently, the noble who dismissed him from the army also informed him of the abandoned fort. That's how he found it and took it over."

"Huuuh," said Braham. "So he was looking out for his men, even when he had

to let 'em go? Sounds like a nice guy."

"I, umm," Zaht stammered. "I guess that's an optimistic way to look at it, sure...but you do remember that we just fought a war with Seitz, right? Doesn't something about them sending ex-soldiers into our territory feel a little malicious to you?"

"Hm? So, wait... You're saying some Seitzan noble told Vigo about the fort so he'd move into Canarre, build up a whole bandit crew, and start wreaking havoc? They wanted all that to happen?"

"I'm saying it's a possibility."

"I get it now," said Braham. "Feels like we might be overthinking this...but if that is true, then wouldn't it mean that Seitz is chomping at the bit to invade us all over again?"

"Exactly," said Zaht. "I'm not sure what Rietz will make of it, but it feels like something he should be informed of."

"Agreed. I'll let him know," said Braham.

Before long, Braham and his squad arrived at Canarre. The bandits they'd taken captive were shut up in the local jail, for the time being. In the long term, they would be judged and punished based on the local laws regarding banditry. Considering they had surrendered, the odds that they would be executed were rather low. More than likely, they would be required to perform manual labor and work off their sentence.

Braham, meanwhile, headed straight for the castle's offices, where he reported the success of his mission to Rietz.

"So, you eliminated the threat with virtually no casualties on your part?" said

Rietz as he raised an eyebrow in surprise. "I have to admit that I had my worries when Lord Ars recommended you for this task, but it seems you have grown by leaps and bounds. I'm impressed."

"Th-Thank you!" said Braham.

Rietz had a reputation for being quite harsh with anyone other than Ars. He wasn't the sort of person who would deliver offhanded compliments, and yet this time, he'd openly praised Braham. Braham knew what a big deal that was, and found himself grinning as the fact sank in.

"I will discuss your reward for this accomplishment with Lord Ars at a later date. In any case, well done," said Rietz.

"Understood! Just doing my best, like always!" Braham excitedly declared, then left the room.



A few days had passed since I'd given Braham his mission to deal with our bandit problem, and I had yet to hear back about how it had turned out for him. To be honest, I was starting to get a little worried. Had it really been a good idea to put a task like that on his shoulders?

Yes, Braham needed real-world experience in order to grow further, but "putting the cart before the horse" would be an understatement if I sent him out too soon and got him killed in the process. I was starting to think that I should have started by putting him up against a weaker, safer opponent. It was too late to reconsider my choice, though, so all I could do was accept things as they were and keep faith in him. Still, I just couldn't help but feel pessimistic about the whole affair.

Just then, one of Castle Canarre's servants arrived. "Lord Ars? Rietz says he has a report for you. Is now a good time?"

Oh! Maybe this is about the bandit mission?

I wasn't doing anything particularly important at the time, so I decided to head down to the office where Rietz was waiting.

"Lord Ars! My apologies for making you come all the way here," Rietz said as I stepped inside. He was waiting for me with Braham at his side.

"That's perfectly fine," I said. "More importantly, you've returned, Braham!"

"That's right! We stormed the fort that the bandits were holed up in, took out their leader, and shut down the whole operation! A few of my men were wounded, but we didn't suffer any losses—all of us made it back alive!" Braham reported.

"Excellent work!" I said. My praise came from the bottom of my heart—I couldn't overstate the relief and joy that I felt upon hearing that all of my worries were misplaced and he'd won the day after all.

While I was at it, I took the opportunity to appraise Braham and check his stats. His Leadership score had risen all the way to 77, from a score of 68 the last time I'd checked it. I was shocked to think that a single bandit extermination mission could result in such a dramatic improvement. On the other hand, he'd been up against former Seitzan soldiers who'd occupied a fortified position, so for all intents and purposes it hadn't been much different from a full-blown battle. Perhaps that explained his exceptional growth?

He still had plenty of room to grow, even with the leap he'd just taken. I was starting to think that his Leadership might break into the eighties before I knew it, which would put him on par with genuine top-class generals. Sending Braham into live combat clearly hadn't been a mistake after all.

I went on to have Braham describe the details of how the mission had gone. It seemed that the MVP of the battle had been his second-in-command, Zaht. A chill ran down my spine when Braham described how close to death Zaht had come—he was a truly capable man who I definitely didn't want to lose. His Leadership score wasn't impressive, so he wasn't suitable for a position of command, but since the rest of his stats were all high he made for a remarkable advisor. In fact, he'd been the one to come up with the plan that won the day. As I'd anticipated, Braham and Zaht seemed to make an excellent team. I decided to give both of them a special reward for their achievements this time.

"You've both met and exceeded my expectations, Braham," I said. "You can

look forward to some extra gold coins for both you and Zaht as reward for your services."

"Huh?! Me too? Are you sure?" asked Braham.

"Very," I replied. "You've done an exemplary job leading your squad, and you deserve credit for ensuring that Zaht made it out alive as well."

"Th-Thank you very much!" Braham shouted, sounding almost moved. He gave me a deep bow of gratitude. "And, umm...ah, right! I almost forgot! There's something else I have to report to you!" he continued, shooting back upright a moment later.

According to Braham, the leader of the bandit gang he'd wiped out—whose name, apparently, had been Vigo—had taken over the fort after being dismissed from the Seitzan army by the noble that had recruited him. Furthermore, that noble was the one who had told him about the fort in the first place.

"Hmm... Yes, this does seem to have been part of a Seitzan plot," Rietz said thoughtfully after Braham finished his explanation.

"You think so too?" I asked.

"I can't say with complete certainty, but it strikes me as probable," said Rietz.

I'd reached the same conclusion. It just seemed too convenient for Seitz to have been anything other than deliberate. There was always the slight chance that teaching Vigo about the fort had been nothing more than an act of mercy on his former lord's part, but if that had been the case, it would have made much more sense to give him a formal endorsement and help him get a more respectable job within Seitz itself. By all rights, there was no need to send him all the way into Canarre, much less to teach him about a fort he could take over.

"Do you think this means that Seitz is planning another invasion?" I asked

Rietz.

"It's possible," said Rietz. "Still, the fact that they chose such roundabout tactics also serves as proof that they're aware they stand at a disadvantage. The ambiguous nature of this incident makes it difficult to justify a counterattack on Missian's part—after all, we have no clear evidence that Seitz was at fault—so it's likely they believed it would let them chip away at our defenses without risking a counterattack. It's clear that they have no intention of making peace with us, so I see this as a means of harassment in anticipation of another invasion in the long term."

"I see," I said. "So we don't have to worry about Seitz knocking on our door anytime soon. On the other hand, this surely won't be the last time they try to test our defenses like this."

"Correct. I believe that an extra dose of vigilance is in order," said Rietz.

We'd managed to resolve the issue before any major harm could be done, this time, but if we'd been slower about handling the bandits they could've inflicted some serious damage. I couldn't even begin to imagine how Seitz would hassle us next, but one way or another, we needed to be prepared for it.

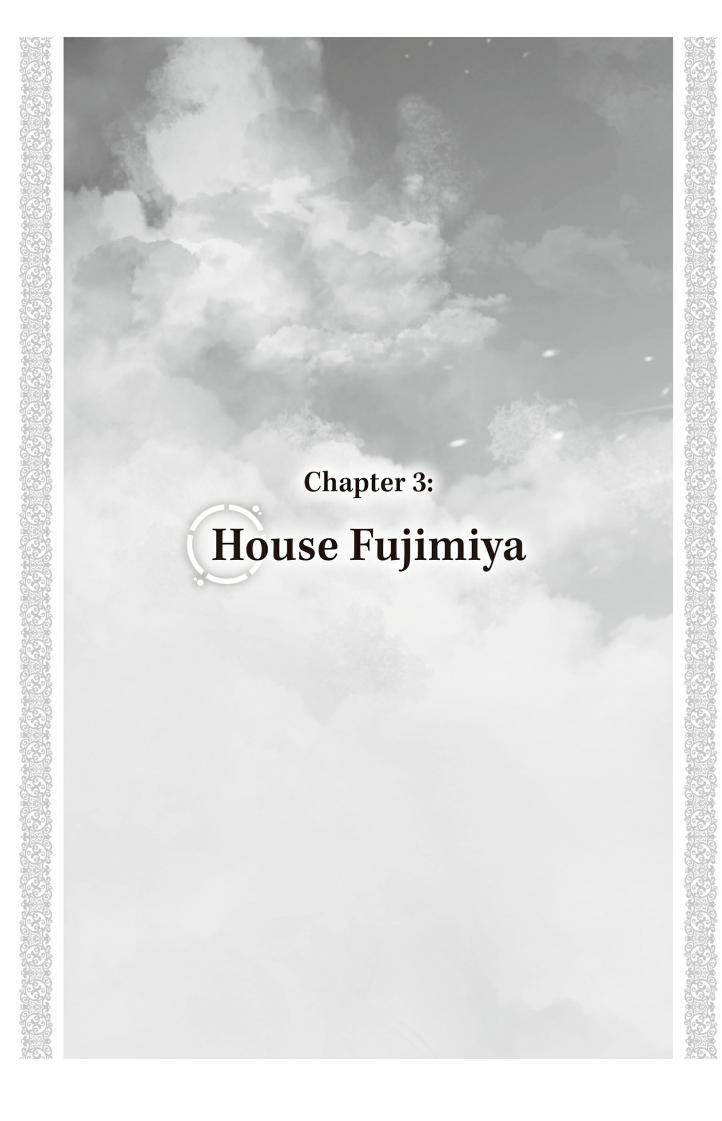
"Thank you. This was very important and useful information, and I hope you'll convey my gratitude to Zaht as well," I said to Braham.

"Will do! And whatever the enemy's plotting, you can count on me to take care of 'em!"

"Braham," Rietz sighed. "Try not to let this victory go to your head, okay?"

"Ah! R-Right, of course. Sorry, Rietz."

The moment Braham's ego started to inflate, Rietz stepped in to chide him. Much as Braham had changed, it was clear that on a basic level, he was still the same person as ever. That said, he'd carried us through a crisis and grown by leaps and bounds in the process, so I was ready to call this a victory worth celebrating. I just had to hope he'd keep that pace up and, eventually, turn into a general even more capable than Rietz and Mireille.



One day, Rietz and I were walking through the main street of Canarre. Our objective: to search for new recruits the old-fashioned way.

I'd gotten pretty used to sending out word of my recruitment drives and waiting for candidates to come see me in the castle, but I figured that there wouldn't be any harm in going back to my roots and walking through town to appraise people I happened to come across as well. After all, some people who might make good retainers wouldn't think to come to the castle on their own initiative...and, frankly, I also just wanted to get out and walk around a little for the fun of it. That was actually the bigger reason, if I was being completely honest.

Rietz had accompanied me as my bodyguard. I couldn't exactly walk around on my own, considering there was no telling what sort of schemes Seitz might have been getting up to. I'd chosen Rietz for the task myself—he'd been quite busy lately, and I thought that taking what more or less amounted to a break to walk around Canarre would be good for him. That being said, he was taking his guard duty a little too seriously, perhaps. In fact, he seemed even more high-strung than ever, and I was starting to worry this would just tire him out even more. My plan may have backfired, unfortunately.

"Rietz, it's the middle of the day," I said. "Nobody's going to attack us when we're out in the open like this. You should try to relax a little."

"Relax...? How could I do such a thing? I can't risk exposing you to danger, Lord Ars, especially considering the troubles with thievery that Canarre's been facing," Rietz replied.

I'd heard about the city's burglar troubles as well. A notably crafty and vicious group of them had arrived in the area. Apparently, they hadn't just been stealing valuable goods—they'd also been abducting people. I'd mobilized our forces to hunt them down, but so far, we hadn't had any success on that front. For all the trouble they'd been causing, they were also very good at lying low when the heat was on them, which made them a very troublesome problem to solve.

The group of bandits we'd driven out of an old fort, it seemed, had only been the start of Canarre's problems. We'd seen more and more troublesome groups move into the county as of late. That, unfortunately, struck me as inevitable—as the population grew, so too would the number of troublemakers we'd have to deal with.

I walked all the way to the city's central plaza, appraising people as I went, but I had yet to find anyone that caught my eye. That wasn't unexpected, to be clear. I knew very well that exceptional people weren't so easy to find, and I wouldn't have been surprised if I'd gone the whole day without finding even one.

"Hm? Lord Ars, look-there's a group of people wearing very unusual clothing," Rietz muttered to me.

I checked in the direction he'd gestured, and picked out a trio—two young men and one young woman—standing near the center of the plaza. They were indeed dressed in a very unusual manner, by Canarre's standards: their clothes looked very similar to traditional Japanese garb. Actually, their facial features struck me as distinctly Japanese as well, just like mine had been in my previous life. One of them was a man of medium build, the other a larger, more muscular man, and the third a small-statured girl with long, messy hair.

"Do you suppose they're from another continent? Why would people like them be in Canarre?" asked Rietz, a note of suspicion entering his voice. To be fair, being skeptical of strangers was more or less a bodyguard's job, especially when they were so unusual in appearance.

I, on the other hand, found myself feeling a strange sense of familiarity with the mysterious trio, maybe on account of my previous life as a Japanese person. It's not like I had no doubts, of course—I may have been Japanese in my past life, but I'd been living in this world for a long time now, and was no longer as naive as I used to be.

The three of them were clustered around the billboard near the center of the plaza, looking at the various recruitment posters on display there. I took that to mean that they knew the local language—they wouldn't have been staring at the poster so intently if they couldn't read it.

For a moment I wondered if they were searching for a lord to serve, but it was too early to make that conclusion for sure. House Louvent's recruitment poster wasn't the only one on display on that billboard, so it was possible they hadn't been thinking about that sort of position at all.

It was, however, clear to me that they were looking for work in Canarre, and I knew that would be a pretty tall order for foreigners like them. I decided to appraise them—after all, if they were capable enough then I'd have no problem with bringing them into my employ. I decided to start with the man with the medium build. His hair was gray, and his features were rather attractive on the whole. He also had a sword hung from his belt, which on a second glance seemed to be rather finely-made. I took a close look at him, and activated my skill.

Rikuya Fujimiya

Age: 18

Male

Status:

LEA: 60/75

VAL: 68/75

INT: 63/75

POL: 65/75

Ambition: 54

Aptitudes:

Infantry: B

Cavalry: B

Archer: B

Mage: D

Fortification: B

Weaponry: D

Naval: B

Aerial: D

Strategy: B

Born on the twentieth day of the sixth month, 194 Imperial Era, in Tenn City, nation of Yoh. Has eight older brothers, five older sisters, one younger brother, and one younger sister. Parents, eight older brothers, and five older sisters have passed away. Younger brother and sister both alive. A serious and diligent individual. Likes rice balls. No hobbies in particular. Enjoys the company of kind women.

Even his name, Rikuya Fujimiya, screamed "Japanese" to me. The fact that every single one of his stats had a maximum score of 75 also made him

something of a rarity. He didn't have one single area he excelled in, but it seemed like he could make an excellent all-rounder.

What really caught my attention was his place of birth, a country called Yoh. I'd never heard of a nation by that name before, though then again, I knew next to nothing about any of the lands that lay outside the continent of Summerforth. The fact that all of his older siblings and his parents were dead was quite something, too. I'd appraised plenty of people who'd lost their parents, but losing thirteen siblings on top of it seemed like a lot to deal with, to say the least. It wasn't uncommon for children to die young in this world, but the fact that he'd had that many siblings to begin with made me wonder if there was something unusual about his family circumstances.

I moved on to appraise the muscular man next. His head was shaven, and he was exceptionally tall, with the sort of face that gave him a naturally intimidating aura.

Takao Fujimiya

Age: 16

Male

Status:

LEA: 44/79

VAL: 90/99

INT: 12/21

POL: 10/25

Ambition: 12

Aptitudes:

Infantry: S

Cavalry: A

Archer: A

Mage: D

Fortification: D

Weaponry: D

Naval: D

Aerial: D

Strategy: D

Born on the thirteenth day of the fourth month, 196 Imperial Era, in Tenn City, nation of Yoh. Has nine older brothers and six older sisters. Father, eight older brothers, and five older sisters have passed away. Mother, one older brother, and one older sister alive. A laid-back individual who loves meat. Enjoys eating and taking naps. Likes tall women.

The burly man's stats had extreme highs and lows, to say the least. His Valor score was remarkable—I'd gotten the impression that he was tough from his appearance, and in this case, looks hadn't been deceiving.

I also took note of the fact that he was also a Fujimiya. Maybe he and Rikuya were siblings? They looked nothing like each other, but then again, Rikuya's mother was dead while Takao's was still alive. If they were half-siblings then the extreme differences in their appearances would all make sense. In fact, the more I thought about it the more likely it seemed to me, though I supposed I would have to ask to be certain.

Finally, I appraised the girl. She looked young, with rather scruffy black hair. Her gaze had a certain sharpness to it which gave her an intimidating air for someone so short, and she was rather attractive as well.

Maika Fujimiya

Age: 17

Female

Status:

LEA: 12/22

VAL: 9/15

INT: 90/99

POL: 71/91

Ambition: 34

Aptitudes:

Infantry: D

Cavalry: D

Archer: D

Mage: D

Fortification: D

Weaponry: A

Naval: D

Aerial: D

Strategy: S

Born on the first day of the second month, 195 Imperial Era, in Tenn City, nation of Yoh. Has nine older brothers, five older sisters, and one younger brother. Father, eight older brothers, and five older sisters have passed away. Mother, one older brother, and one younger brother alive. A logical and rational person. Loves sweets, and enjoys collecting ancient relics. Likes smart men.

So her name's Maika...? I thought to myself. Her Intelligence score was incredibly high, though on the other hand, her Valor was one of the lowest I'd

ever seen. She was, presumably, not built for combat. Her Leadership was low too, so I couldn't see her going out in battle. Her stats were just as unbalanced as Takao's, though in the exact opposite direction, and her family name was also Fujimiya. Were all three of them siblings, maybe?

Maika was short, even for a girl, and her figure was so childlike that I'd assumed she'd be the youngest of the group, but as it turned out she was a year older than Takao. I felt a little bad for thinking it, but to be honest, I never would've guessed that she was seventeen. She looked like she was my age.

All around, the three of them were quite the remarkable trio. Rikuya didn't excel in any one area but had no weaknesses either, Takao had incredible Valor, and Maika had remarkable Intelligence. I had no doubt that they'd make excellent retainers, and wanted to recruit them at all costs.

"Have those three caught your eye, Lord Ars?" asked Rietz. It seemed he'd noticed that I was observing them, and he'd known me for long enough to more or less guess what I was thinking at times like these.

"They have," I said. "I appraised them, and they're all quite talented. I'd love to bring them into my service, if I can..."

Just then, before I could finish my explanation, a shout rang out.

"You there! Child!"

I turned to look and found Maika glaring at me, her brow furrowed with what seemed at a glance to be fury.

"Don't think I haven't noticed you staring at us!" she shouted. "What are you after?! Has my overwhelming talent terrified you so much that you've decided to have me assassinated?! Or has my beauty so bewitched you that you've chosen to abduct me and make me your own?! Confess your crimes, wicked

one!"

Clearly, my stare had not gone unnoticed—and had caused one hell of a misunderstanding, to boot. I frantically shook my head.

"No, nothing of the sort! I'd never do either of those things, or anything like them!" I replied.

"Then why were you staring at me?!" Maika shouted back. Her attitude had become so menacing at that point that Rietz felt the need to step between us, standing at the ready in case she tried anything.

"Grr... Wh-What? Are you trying to start something?" Maika growled as she flinched away from Rietz. She definitely wasn't much of a fighter, considering the results of my appraisal, so it struck me as a natural reaction.

At that point, Rikuya—who'd been reading the fliers on the billboard—noticed what was happening and came rushing over. He had a sword hung at his hip, which meant that if I let this misunderstanding carry on for any longer it could prove very dangerous, especially considering that Rietz's hand had just dropped to the hilt of his weapon.

"Oh, Brother!" said Maika. "Excellent timing! This boy was-"

For just a moment I was worried that a fight was about to break out...but then Rikuya proved me wrong and cut Maika off by driving his fist straight into her skull. It was such a solid blow that I actually heard the impact.

"Aaaaaaugh!" Maika shrieked as tears pooled in her eyes. "Wh-What are you doing, Brother?!"

"What are you doing?! I told you a thousand times not to bother the locals, didn't I?!" Rikuya shouted back, then turned to me. "A thousand apologies! She means no harm, she just has no common sense!" he said, giving me a deep

bow.

"Come on, you too! Show some shame for once!" Rikuya added as he grabbed the back of Maika's head and forced her to bow as well.

At that, Rietz seemed to decide that they weren't a threat after all and released his sword's hilt.

"No need to apologize. She didn't cause any harm, after all. Please, no need to bow," I said.

Rikuya and Maika straightened up once more. "M-Many thanks, good sir," said Rikuya.

"Ugh..." Maika grumbled unhappily.

"We'll be on our way, then," said Rikuya. He was all too excited to make an exit, but considering I was hoping to recruit him and his siblings, I couldn't let that happen.

"Wait," I said.

"Huh?" grunted Rikuya.

"Are the three of you looking for work?"

"Well, yes," Rikuya hesitantly acknowledged. Skepticism was written all over his face—he clearly didn't understand why a child would be asking him that.

"Good! It just so happens that I have a position I could recommend you for. Are you interested?" I asked.

"Huh? You do?" Rikuya said disbelievingly.

"I do! Perhaps I should introduce myself, to start," I said. "My name is Ars Louvent, and the man accompanying me is called Rietz Muses."

"O-Oh, is that so...? Well, umm, you can call me Rikuya Fujimiya," Rikuya replied, matching my introduction with his own in spite of his misgivings.

"Ars Louvent...that's the name of the Count of Canarre, isn't it? And I just saw a flier indicating that he was searching for retainers to take into his service. I think I understand now—you've perceived our capabilities and decided to recruit us, haven't you?" said Maika. Her brother still hadn't managed to swallow the situation, but she, in sharp contrast, had figured out exactly what was happening from my name alone.

"Don't be ridiculous," scolded Rikuya. "How could a child like him possibly be the—?"

"Rumor has it that the count's only fourteen. Haven't you heard, Brother?"

"We only just arrived in this town, so of course I haven't! Wait...where did *you* hear about that?"

"I overheard someone discussing it at the pub. Surely you were listening, too?"

"I don't make a point of eavesdropping on people, or memorizing conversations I happen to overhear, either," Rikuya sighed. I, meanwhile, made a mental note that Maika was both very observant and also had quite the memory. "I'll admit that he's dressed rather well. I assumed you were the scion of some well-to-do family...but is it true? Are you the count?"

I nodded.

"Well! That's certainly remarkable, but I'm sure you're not trying to solicit us to be your retainers. I can only assume you're hoping to recruit us for a less savory task that most common folk wouldn't be able to handle...?"

"Actually, no. I was hoping to take you into my formal service," I replied.

"Seriously...?" muttered Rikuya. He was in a state of utter shock.

"Heh heh! No need to be so startled, Brother. The cause is clear: my talents were too great for me to conceal!" Maika said with a sneering grin, her arms crossed triumphantly. "It's high time I introduced myself. I am Maika Fujimiya, the most talented tactician in all of Yoh!" she declared.

"You're smart, and I won't deny it, but someone who's never won a battle can hardly call herself a talented tactician," sighed Rikuya.

"Hmph! I would have accolades to my name by now, if only our late father and brothers hadn't failed to carry out my brilliant strategy," countered Maika. I wasn't following their exchange—clearly, the two of them had been through quite a lot that only they would understand.

"And honestly," Rikuya continued, "anyone meeting you for the first time would assume that you're just some random shrimp, based on first impression alone. He can't have been aiming for you in particular."

"Sh-Shrimp?!" Maika shrieked indignantly.

"I'm not that impressive at a glance, either... Oh, of course, Takao! You can tell how strong he is just by looking at him. He must be the one the count was after!"

"Family or not, there are some things that not even you're allowed to say about me, Brother!" Maika shouted. Her righteous fury might have been quite intimidating if it weren't for the fact that she was so tiny.

"Wait, where is Takao?" asked Rikuya.

Rikuya spun around to search for the third member of their trio. I looked as well, and spotted him sprawled out on the ground by the billboard. Apparently, he was asleep.

"Unbelievable...he's sleeping on the street again," Rikuya groaned, clutching his head. Apparently, this was a recurring issue with him. "Well, the guy sleeping over there is named Takao. He's exactly as strong as he looks, but he's also about as smart as a sack of bricks. I can't say he'd make for the best retainer."

"Actually," I said, "I was hoping to recruit him anyway, along with the two of you."

"Huh...?" Rikuya blinked. "You mean, you want him so badly that you'll take us in too, just to ensure he agrees to join you?"

"Not quite. I believe that all three of you have talents that would be useful to me," I replied.

"How could you possibly know that?" asked Rikuya, which was fair enough. I was about to give him a quick explanation of my Appraisal skill, but before I could, I was interrupted.

"Heh heh heh! I'm certain now—my talent is far too overwhelming to ever hope to conceal!" Maika said, her arms crossed and a smug smirk spreading across her face once more.

"Okay, but...just look at her," protested Rikuya. "Not only is she a shrimp, but you'd think she has a brick for a brain listening to the way she usually talks! Most people would never even consider hiring her unless they'd had the time to get to know her!"

"Why, you—Again?! You won't get away with it this time!" Maika shouted. Apparently, being called a shrimp twice in a row was too much for her to look past. She started battering Rikuya with her fists...but she was both quite weak and very bad at punching, so Rikuya just ignored her.

"Um... Your Lordship?" whispered Rietz. "I'll admit that they're an interesting bunch, but are you sure about taking these three in as your retainers?"

Considering how our encounter with them had gone so far, his worries were understandable. I was starting to worry a little, myself. Takao and Maika in particular clearly had unbalanced personalities to match their unbalanced stat distributions. But, when all was said and done, I knew their talent was the real deal.

"I'm certain it'll be fine," I whispered back. "They don't seem to trust us, though, so can you help me try to talk them into it?"

"Understood," said Rietz.

Around that time, Maika gave up on her not-so-relentless assault and stooped over, gasping for breath. "I'll...let you off...with that...for today," she wheezed. Rikuya, of course, hadn't been so much as scratched, so her effort didn't seem to have borne any fruit.

Maika took a moment to catch her breath, then gave me an appraising glance. "Hmm. Well, I'll admit, I'm well aware that I look like little more than a cute, precious little girl, at a glance."

"If you knew that already, then why chew me out over it?" sighed Rikuya. "And wait, did you just call yourself cute?"

"You've picked a poor quip to question, Brother," said Maika with a glare.

"You know what...? If that's how you see yourself, then who am I to argue?" said Rikuya. I'd been expecting him to fire back, but he'd just let it slide instead. As a side note, Maika did have a point—she was rather cute, when all was said and done.

"Moreover," Maika continued, picking up her previous thought, "women's

skills are undervalued, by and large. Not to mention that we are outsiders to these lands! It is indeed suspect that one would try to recruit us on a first meeting, considering all these circumstances...and yet, I am inclined to trust him anyway."

"Why's that?" asked Rikuya.

"You read the flier on the billboard, did you not? It said that anyone with talent would be welcomed, regardless of race or sex. And to top it off, the man who's accompanying him is clearly unlike most Summerforth natives in appearance. He's a Malkan, I believe—a race subject to terrible prejudice in these lands."

"A Malkan...? That does ring a bell, now that you mention it. Are you sure he's one of them, though?"

"I've never seen one myself, but he matches the characteristics I've been told of. If he's one of the count's close associates, we can take it to mean that the flier was not exaggerating about his willingness to employ anyone."

"I understand that, but it just doesn't seem like a good enough reason for him to hire us."

"He claims that he'll take anyone with talent into his service. In other words, he believes himself capable of discerning those with talent at a glance! I don't know whether he does have that capability, or whether he just got lucky this time, but one way or another it's clear that he's identified us as talented enough to interest him."

"I'll admit...it would be incredible if he had the ability to judge talent that easily, but at a glance? Really? Surely he'd have to test us, or at least interview us?"

"Only he could explain how it works. Perhaps it is just a matter of taking one look at us. And it's not as if interviews and tests can tell you whether someone will prove useful in the long run either, can they?"

"Hmm..." Rikuya muttered. It seemed that Maika had at least partially sold him on her line of thought.

"That said," Maika continued, "considering he chose to solicit our help so readily, I'm almost inclined to believe he *does* have the power to see through talent at a glance."

Maika had sussed out the possibility of my Appraisal skill from a single look at one of my recruitment posters. It was clear that she was as smart as my skill had claimed.

"Is it true? Can you perceive people's talents?" asked Rikuya.

"I can," I replied. Trying to keep it secret would have just set the conversation back at that point.

"And does it really only take a glance for you to do it?"

I nodded.

"Seriously...? I can hardly even imagine what I could've done with a power like that. Maybe then... No, no point in dwelling on it," Rikuya muttered to himself with a shake of his head. "Does this ability of yours let you see people's current abilities, or their full potential?"

"Both," I replied.

"Both...? I've been told I'm quite skillful, and I've never had much difficulty with any task I was given, but on the other hand, I've never found anything I truly excel at either. I've been treated as a prodigy and a jack of all trades, but at the same time, I know plenty of people also refer to me as a master of none,"

said Rikuya, launching into a very abrupt and personal monologue. "I always wished that I'd someday discover a latent talent slumbering within me. I gave up on that dream long ago...but if you're trying to recruit me, then should I take that to mean that I do have some form of untapped potential?"

"Well...umm," I floundered, then decided to be honest with him. "To be honest, no. You don't have any single ability that stands out above the others, but you are capable in all fields, which makes you a very solid candidate in my book."

"C-Capable in all fields...? Yes, well, that...certainly makes it sound nice, but... should I take that to mean that when everyone called me a jack of all trades, master of none, they were...right?"

"Y-You could also call yourself an all-rounder!" I suggested.

"That's the same damn thing!" Rikuya groaned. I was starting to appreciate that he had a real chip on his shoulder regarding his abilities.

"How dare you?!" shouted Maika, wheeling about on me. "My brother is very sensitive about the fact that he's a common, if not mediocre man with no distinguishing traits in particular to speak of! Calling him an all-rounder is tantamount to calling him a waste of space!"

"Common? Mediocre? No distinguishing traits?!" Rikuya repeated, sinking deeper and deeper into depression as Maika's word choice carved his self-esteem to pieces.

"See?! Look what you've done! He's inconsolable!" said Maika.

"Thanks to you, you idiot!" Rikuya wailed. He looked like he was on the verge of tears.

"Brother, Sister...I'm hungry," said Takao. I hadn't even noticed him approach

the other two from behind—in fact, I'd thought he was still asleep. He was certainly up now, though, and rubbing his rumbling stomach.

"We just ate, didn't we? Tough it out," said Rikuya.

"That wasn't a meal. That was just a snack," moaned Takao.

"Any normal person would call that a meal, and we don't have the money to keep shoveling food down your gullet! Wait until dinner."

Takao's shoulders slumped with disappointment. Shockingly intense disappointment, actually. A body that big took a lot of food to fuel, it seemed.

"Anyway, I get the picture. You want to hire us..." Rikuya said, turning to me, crossing his arms, then sinking into thought. "But...no. That's out of the question. You'll have to find someone else."

"Are you sure about that? I assure you you'll be satisfied by our wages," I said. Becoming a count's retainer would have put them on the sort of salary that most people could only dream of.

"It's not about the money," said Rikuya. "I mean, I'll admit, we are pressed for cash..."

"Well then, why?" I pressed.

"It's complicated," said Rikuya. I didn't get the sense he wanted to tell me any more than that, and considering we'd only just met, pressing for details felt like a bad idea.

"You should know, Brother, that if we agree to serve this boy, it will allow us to achieve our own objectives at a far greater pace," chimed in Maika.

"Ugh," Rikuya grunted, then paused to mull the matter over once more. Maika seemed enthusiastic about our offer, at least, but Rikuya soon shook his

head once again. "No, no, we can't. Becoming someone's retainer just isn't on the table."

"Very well," Maika said, then didn't press the issue any further. For all her assertiveness, it seemed she'd entrusted Rikuya with the final say when it came to big decisions like this.

"We're honored to receive such a generous offer, but I'm afraid to say that we must respectfully decline," said Rikuya, turning to me and offering a formal refusal.

I didn't want to give up on them, but on the other hand, I didn't know what to say to bring them around. As I tried to come up with my next move, however, Rietz stepped in to lend a hand.

"That's a shame—isn't it, Lord Ars?" he said, then turned his gaze to Rikuya.

"Might I ask how long the three of you intend to stay in Canarre?"

"We'll be here a while if we can find work, but otherwise, we'll be moving on to the next town before long," said Rikuya.

"Understood. In that case, might I offer you an alternate opportunity? The name of House Louvent carries great weight in these parts, and if Lord Ars were to offer you his endorsement, you might find it much easier to find employment," suggested Rietz.

Oh, I get it! That means that at the very least we'll keep them around in Canarre, and they'll owe us a favor on top of it.

Rikuya had kept his reasons for not wanting to become my retainer vague, but there was still a chance that their circumstances would change with time. I was immediately on board with Rietz's idea.

"Huh? Seriously?!" exclaimed Rikuya. "And right after we turned you down...?

You're a real stand-up guy, aren't you?"

"Brother..." Maika sighed. "You're being far too credulous. He's hoping to keep us in town so he can win us over and ultimately recruit us. Doing us a favor will make it harder for us to turn down his requests in the future. Men of their stature don't extend purposeless pity."

We'd almost had Rikuya, but unfortunately, his sister had seen through our intentions. On the other hand, we hadn't been making an effort to conceal them.

"I-I see," said Rikuya.

"That being said, I believe their offer is still worth taking," Maika continued. "Unmistakably foreign though we are, the word of the count will surely allow us to find work. Wandering aimlessly as we have so far, on the other hand, offers no such guarantee. Accepting their referral will not obligate us to become the count's retainer, so I see little reason for you to refuse."

"You have a point," Rikuya said, then lapsed into thought again.

"If this can get us work, I think we should do it. Work means we can eat more," Takao chimed in.

"Do you seriously have nothing but food on your brain...? I guess it is important, though, so fair enough," said Rikuya. Finally, he seemed to come to a decision and turned to face Rietz, his expression firm and formal. "We will gladly take you up on your most gracious offer," he said.

"Understood," said Rietz. "In that case, please make your way to Castle Canarre tomorrow. We can discuss the details then."



"All right," said Rikuya.

With that, we'd managed to tie the three of them down in Canarre for the time being. There was no guarantee I'd be able to win them over, but at least it was a start, and it was certainly better than having them wander off to some other county. For the time being, though, we said our goodbyes and returned to the castle.

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"Thanks for helping out back there, Rietz. That was some quick thinking," I said after we'd split up with the Fujimiya trio. His offer to introduce them to a suitable job had turned the situation around.

"N-No need to thank me! I just did what was natural," Rietz replied, embarrassed by my compliment.

"By the way, do you know anything about a country called Yoh? I think they said that's where they're from, didn't they?"

"I've heard the name," said Rietz. "If memory serves, it's located on an island to the far southeast of Summerforth. I'm afraid I don't know anything about the nation itself, though. My apologies."

"It's fine," I said. "I was just thinking that they had a lot going on, and if we could just figure out what their circumstances were, it might make it easier to recruit them. The girl, Maika, seemed open to the idea of becoming my retainer, at least."

"Yes, I see what you mean... It's possible that Rosell might know more. The

breadth of his knowledge is remarkable."

Rosell absorbed information like a sponge. Not only was his memory superb, but he also made a point of reading any and every book he could get his hands on. He was the most knowledgeable of my retainers by far, so I figured Rietz had a point—Rosell really might know a thing or two about Yoh.

I decided to seek Rosell out and ask if he knew anything. To that end, I headed straight for the castle's library. As expected, I found him within the chamber, writing something with piles of books strewn about his vicinity. Rosell's daily activities were quite varied—he'd read books, come up with new tools and weapons, and even plan out new policies for Canarre with Rietz. At the moment, he seemed to be compiling his many ideas into a readable form.

"Do you have a minute, Rosell?" I asked.

"Oh, Ars! What's up?" Rosell replied. He made a habit of concentrating so hard he wound up in his own little world and hadn't noticed me enter the room at all, but talking to him snapped him out of his trance.

"I was hoping you might be able to fill me in on something. Do you know anything about a country called Yoh?"

"Yoh? Yeah, I do," Rosell replied immediately. "It's an island nation located southeast of Summerforth. They're dealing with a lot of the same issues the empire is—they've got a civil war going on, apparently. I read that in a book that was written a pretty long while ago, though, so it might've already settled down by now."

"A civil war...?" I muttered.

"Yup," said Rosell with a nod. "The people there are supposed to look pretty different from Summerforth folks. Oh, and I guess civil wars happen all the time

over there, so a lot of its inhabitants are used to war. Supposedly, they'd already developed advanced martial arts and swordsmanship techniques way back before the Summerforth Empire was even founded. I know about that because of records about a band of mercenaries from Yoh that showed up back in the day and wreaked havoc over here."

Rosell carried on for some time, dumping every bit of info on the country that he had to offer. The study of foreign nations wasn't his specialty by any means, so I was pretty impressed by the sheer depth of his knowledge.

"Why did you want to know about Yoh, anyway?" Rosell asked when he'd hit a stopping point in his lecture. I quickly explained about our encounter with Rikuya and his siblings. "Oh, huh! That'd do it. You always go after the weird ones when you're looking for retainers," Rosell replied.

"I just don't like letting exceptional people slip away from me," I countered.

"Fair enough," said Rosell. "I wonder why they turned you down, though? Finding any sort of job is tough for foreigners, so you'd think that an offer like that would've been a great opportunity for them..."

Rosell, it seemed, was just as mystified by Rikuya's refusal as I had been. A moment later, however, an idea seemed to occur to him.

"Huh? Wait a minute—did you say their surname was Fujimiya?" he said. "I'm pretty sure that's the name of Yoh's ruling house."

"Their ruling house? You mean they're royalty?" I asked.

"Yup," said Rosell. "From what I remember, the recent civil war broke out because House Fujimiya's authority was starting to deteriorate."

"Could that mean that the Fujimiyas lost the civil war, and the survivors ended up fleeing to the empire?" I asked. If the document Rosell had read

about the civil war was that old, then it seemed plausible that the war had already come to an end by now.

"Maybe...but just because they have the royal family's name doesn't mean they're part of it," said Rosell. "They might just be faking it, for one thing, and supposedly, Fujimiya's not that uncommon of a surname, so it might just be a coincidence. That wouldn't happen in Summerforth, since falsely claiming the imperial family's name is a crime, but that's not the case in other places."

"I see," I said with a nod.

It did feel like I might have been jumping to conclusions...but on the other hand, my appraisal's results had told me that the three of them had a ridiculous number of siblings, and that Rikuya's mother was dead while both Maika's and Takao's were alive, meaning they were only half-siblings. Them being royalty explained the polygamy. The sword that Rikuya was carrying hadn't looked like the sort of weapon that a commoner could get his hands on, either. Even if they weren't part of the ruling family itself, it seemed likely that they came from a noble background in some capacity.

"Them being royalty would explain why they didn't want to become my retainers, though, wouldn't it?" I said. "If they were royals before the civil war forced them into exile, then serving a different noble family wouldn't sit right with them."

"And being a manual laborer would? Wouldn't that be even more humiliating?" Rosell countered.

"That depends on what sort of manual labor we're talking about, I guess. But you can always quit that sort of job whenever you feel like it. That's not so easy when you're serving a lord, is it?"

Becoming a lord's retainer was a serious obligation that involved swearing an oath of fealty. It wasn't the sort of casual arrangement that you could step away from on a whim. Some nobles would see that sort of act as treasonous, and it wasn't unprecedented for people to be executed for it. I certainly had no intention to be that uncompromising, and would probably have let one of my retainers go if they'd insisted, but I knew I was an exception in that regard. I wasn't planning on carrying out any executions, at least, which may have meant that I was still a little too naive for the troubled times I lived in.

"Who knows if they see it that way? You'd have to ask them," said Rosell.

"True enough... But okay, here's a question, if they did turn me down because they're royalty, then how could I go about convincing them to change their minds?"

"Hmm..." Rosell muttered, then lapsed into a lengthy period of thought. He seemed to be struggling with the question. It was a tough one, to be fair—one's lineage was a hard thing to negotiate with, and I didn't even know where to start. There may not be an easy solution to this one.

"For now, I guess you'll just have to meet with them again and see how the conversation goes," Rosell finally said. "That should let you clear up whether or not they're *those* Fujimiyas, as well."

"I guess that makes sense," I admitted. It seemed like the natural conclusion to reach. I didn't know whether or not they would come out and admit that they were royalty, but at the very least, talking with them again would be a step in the right direction.

Thankfully, Rietz's quick thinking had led to them promising to come to Castle Canarre the very next day. I'd almost certainly have the chance to talk with them once more then, and resolved to take advantage of it and clear away

some of my lingering questions.

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The next day, I received word that Rikuya and his siblings had arrived at Castle Canarre. Rietz and I headed out to greet them at once. We found them standing in the entry hall, gawking at the castle's interior.

"So this is Castle Canarre..." Rikuya muttered.

"Will we get to eat lots of good food today, Brother?" asked Takao.

"Do you ever think about anything other than food...? We came here to talk about work, not to eat!" Rikuya snapped back, much to Takao's obvious disappointment.

We guided the three of them to the office. I wanted to jump right into discussing their backgrounds, the circumstances that had led them to Missian, and the reasons why they didn't want to work for me, but I figured it would be best to keep my word and discuss their employment options first.

"Are you really willing to find us jobs?" Rikuya asked skeptically as the discussion kicked off.

"Of course," said Rietz. "You've arrived in Canarre during a period of economic growth, and jobs are abundant as a result. What sort of field would you prefer to work in?"

"A field in which my boundless wit and wisdom shall be put to good use!" declared Maika.

"Umm...meaning a field in which you'll have to do a lot of thinking?" asked

Rietz.

"Quite!" said Maika.

"Hold on a second," said Rikuya, cutting back into the exchange. "That's all well and good for you, sure, but there's no way Takao could cut it in a job like that! It's heavy lifting or nothing for him!"

"H-Heavy lifting? And how do you expect a frail, delicate woman such as I to do work like that?!" said Maika.

Clearly, getting the three of them the same job was a lost cause. "Why don't the three of you try working in different fields?" I suggested.

"D-Different fields...?" Maika repeated apprehensively. "W-Well, yes, I suppose that's a reasonable thought, and while I would be perfectly all right with it, my brothers would be ever so forlorn without me! For their sake, we should find employment that all three of us can participate in..."

"What she's trying to say is that even though she acts like a bigshot, she's pretty timid when she's on her own. It'd probably be for the best to keep us together," said Rikuya.

"Wh-Who are you calling timid?! I'm just watching out for you and Takao!" Maika shot back in a fluster.

"Right, sure, we'll go with that," said Rikuya. "Anyway, setting Maika aside, Takao can't really be trusted to work on his own," he added.

"If eating was a job, I could do that alone," said Takao.

"Case in point," Rikuya sighed.

I had to agree—the idea of sending Takao out to work on his own made me more than a little nervous. That said, I was also drawing a blank when it came to

jobs that would allow both Maika and Takao to excel, considering their opposing strong points.

"I believe we're approaching this from the wrong direction. We should not be looking for employment—we should be looking for an opportunity to start an enterprise of our own," Maika said out of the blue, diverging from the line of thought we'd been traveling down.

"An enterprise?" Rietz repeated skeptically. "I'm afraid that starting any sort of business would require funding..."

"And that's one thing we don't have," said Rikuya.

"But we could...if you would part with your beloved sword," Maika replied, eyeing the blade that Rikuya was carrying.

"Wha—?!" Rikuya spluttered. "I-I've told you before that I'm not selling this under any circumstances! I'm sure you haven't forgotten that discussion!"

"I haven't forgotten, no, but I remain unconvinced! It's hardly a practical blade to begin with. If we want to make the most of its merits, we should sell it."

"You know that's not an option! How are we supposed to bring anyone over to our side when we return home without it?!"

"Hmph! If that sword were truly that potent of a symbol, we would never have had to make our way to Summerforth. If we want to win allies then we need money before all else."

"That's not true, and you know it!"

The conversation had taken a rather contentious turn, and I had no idea why. Neither Rikuya nor Maika seemed to have any interest in filling the rest of us in on the context of their argument.

"What about you, Takao?! What do you think?!" said Rikuya.

"Huh?" grunted Takao. "I'll do whatever you say, Brother..."

"See?! That makes this two versus one!"

"Takao," said Maika, "if we sell the sword, then we'll have plenty of money to feed you anything your heart desires."

"Huh? Okay, then let's sell it," said Takao.

"Heh heh heh! Two versus one indeed," said Maika with a smirk.

"H-Hey! That's not fair! No dragging Takao into this!" snapped Rikuya.

"Big words from the man who started it, Brother!" shouted Maika. By this point, the two were openly glaring at each other.

"What makes you think this sword would sell for a high price in the first place?" asked Rikuya. "There's no reason to believe that a Summerforthian would have any idea what it's worth!"

"In our homeland, that blade would be considered a treasure so valuable, one could hardly assign a price to it...but I do not know how highly it would be appraised here, I admit," said Maika. "However, considering the materials it's made of, I can hardly imagine it would fetch a low price."

"Would you mind if I took a look at that sword?" said Rietz, joining the conversation.

"If you'd like," Rikuya said. He unbuckled the sword from his waist and held it out to Rietz.

It was a slightly curved blade, similar in shape and structure to the katanas I'd seen in my previous life. Its sheath was red, with golden detail work that I suspected had been crafted from actual gold. The guard seemed to be made

from gold as well, with blue gemstones set in it, and the pommel was made in the same fashion, gemstones and all.

"Will you draw it for me?" asked Rietz.

"Sure," said Rikuya, who then did just that. The blade proved as beautiful as its hilt. I didn't know very much about swords, but I could tell that it had been made by a skilled craftsman.

"Hmm... It's shaped somewhat like a scimitar," observed Rietz. "Its edge is finely honed, and I believe the gems in its hilt are blue diamonds..."

Blue diamonds? Aren't those incredibly expensive...? Though, wait, I guess that was back on Earth. Who knows how much they're worth in this world?

"The craftsmanship of the scabbard and hilt are both remarkable, and the materials they're made from are no less fine. Judging by the blade, I imagine it would be of practical use in battle as well," said Rietz. "I think it's likely that if you could find a noble who collects weaponry as a pastime, they would be willing to pay a rather high price for it. It would sell for over a hundred gold coins, at the minimum."

"A hundred?! Isn't that an incredible sum of money?!" gasped Rikuya. Ten gold coins was enough money to live on for a year, meaning the sword was worth a decade's worth of living expenses. It was no wonder he was stunned to hear it.

Maika, however, seemed less than pleased.

"I'd think it would be worth much more than that," she said. "I would have valued it at a thousand, myself."

"I did say at the minimum," said Rietz. "There's no telling how highly a collector would value a piece such as this without finding one and showing it to

them. I will say, however, that I would not be surprised if someone out there was willing to pay a thousand gold for it."

"A thousand is on the table...?" Rikuya said. He spent a moment gawking at the sword in his hand, then gulped. He'd presumably known that selling it was an option, but hadn't realized just how valuable it truly was. His decision to not sell the sword under any circumstances, it seemed, was beginning to waver.

"A hundred gold wouldn't be sufficient to ensure our enterprise's foundation, so I'd sooner sell it to someone who values it more highly," said Maika. "Oh, I know! Our intention today was for you to introduce us to a place of employment, but would you be willing to search for a buyer for the sword instead? We would surrender a portion of the profit to you as a commission, of course! You stand much to gain!"

"Hey! S-Stop making it sound like we're already committed to selling it!" shouted Rikuya. Maika had been all ready to start negotiating the deal, but he wasn't quite ready to take that step yet.

"Hmph! Why so stubborn?" asked Maika. "For all we know, selling the blade could solve all our problems in one fell swoop!"

"Ugh," grunted Rikuya.

"The terms you propose are most attractive to us, so if you are willing to part with the sword, we would be very interested in pursuing the opportunity," said Rietz. I had to agree—I couldn't think of any downsides to the arrangement from House Louvent's perspective.

Rikuya stared once more at the sword, agonizing over his options. As precious as it was to him, the offer of over a hundred gold coins was compelling to someone who was all but broke. I would've thought he'd sell it in an instant,

and the fact that he had to think it over so carefully told me just how important he considered the blade to be.

"We're in dire need of funds, I'll admit," Rikuya finally said, "but this sword is worth so much more than any sum of money... If we were in Yoh, then it would be considered too valuable to ever put a price on. Even a thousand gold coins doesn't come close to approaching its true value."

"True though that may be, returning to Yoh is beyond us. There's no sense wishing for the impossible," said Maika.

"Grr..." Rikuya growled in lieu of an actual argument. There was nothing he could say to refute her claim.

By that point, I'd gathered from their argument that the sword had some sort of incredible significance and value by the standards of their home country. I was starting to get curious about its history. It had clearly been made by an incredible craftsman, but would that be enough to make it just that valuable?

"What is that sword? Is it really that valuable in your homeland?" I asked, my curiosity getting the better of me.

"This sword is an heirloom, passed down through House Fujimiya for generations," explained Rikuya. "It's known as the Wyrmsbane Blade, and as its name would imply, it is said that it was used to slay a dragon in an age long past."

"A dragon...?" I repeated.

I hadn't seen a single dragon since I was reincarnated in my new world. In fact, I wasn't entirely sure if they existed at all—there certainly weren't any in Summerforth, at least. Rumor had it they lived in other regions of the world, but frankly, I viewed those tales with intense skepticism. I'd seen dogs with

wings and cats with horns since I was reincarnated, so I knew that there were creatures in this world that hadn't existed on Earth, but I had yet to see any monsters straight out of a work of fantasy.

In any case, the fact that the sword had been "passed down through House Fujimiya for generations" told me that, as expected, they were almost certainly not your everyday family of commoners. The Fujimiyas likely came from a high place in Yoh's societal structure.

"I have another question," I said. It felt like I had plenty of pretext to throw caution to the wind and ask about their origins, at that point.

"What is it?" said Rikuya.

"I did some looking into Yoh since we last met, and learned that the nation's royal family goes by the name of Fujimiya. Am I safe in assuming that the three of you have some association with the royal line?"

A look of shock passed across Rikuya and Maika's faces.

"Y-You researched us?" Rikuya stammered.

"So word of Yoh's affairs has spread as far as Summerforth," muttered Maika. "Strange. I'd thought next to no trade was conducted between our nations."

"We've told a bunch of people we're from Yoh, and they always made it seem like they had no idea where that is," added Takao, who seemed to be taking the news much more in stride than his siblings.

"Anyway, I think it's clear by now that you aren't bad people...so I suppose I can share the truth," Rikuya said after gathering his resolve. "We are indeed of House Fujimiya, the original ruling family of Yoh—and I am the current head of said house."

Just like that, he'd revealed his identity. We'd already predicted as much, of

course, but it was still quite something to learn for sure that they were royalty.

"Maika and Takao were born to different mothers, but they are also members of the royal family," Rikuya continued. "However, a rebellion occurred within our kingdom. Our father, the king, was killed along with the vast majority of our relatives. We barely managed to make it out alive, bringing the sword with us, and fled to a foreign country."

"I see," I said with a nod. Them ending up in Summerforth now made complete sense.

"I call us royalty, but I should make it clear that if we were to return to our nation, we would be executed on the spot," Rikuya added. "We have no authority in these lands, so for all intents and purposes, we're nothing more than commoners for the time being. In fact, as foreigners, our standing is lesser than that of the local peasantry. If you hope to make use of our status, I regret to inform you that we have little to offer."

"I had no such intention," I immediately clarified.

"The Wyrmsbane Blade has traditionally been inherited by the successor to the Fujimiya line," Rikuya said as he held the sword aloft. "In other words, it's the symbol of the king of Yoh."

Suddenly, the blade's priceless nature made perfect sense to me.

"Are you sure you should be selling something so precious to begin with?" I asked.

"At this moment, we need money above all else. Our goal is to return to Yoh and restore House Fujimiya to its former glory. We'll need soldiers to accomplish that, and money to hire them."

"You hope to restore your house to power?" I asked.

"Of course," said Maika. "We have no intention of ending our lives in exile."

Maika's expression made it clear that she was serious, but I had to wonder: was their goal really achievable? Gathering up soldiers in Summerforth to launch an invasion of Yoh seemed like quite the task...though then again, the empire was hardly lacking in mercenaries for them to employ. Some of them would surely be willing to fight in a foreign land, as long as they were paid enough for the task, so if the Fujimiyas could build up a big enough warchest, I couldn't rule it out. That being said, I also couldn't imagine that defeating an entire nation's military would be that easy.

"The state of Yoh's magical technology is underdeveloped compared to that of Summerforth. If we assemble enough talented mages from these lands, then victory will be feasible," Maika explained confidently. Considering the sort of earth-shaking effects that well-used magic could have on a battlefield, part of me believed her—if their enemies weren't capable of using it, then maybe they did stand a chance of winning.

"I appreciate your need for funding," said Rietz, "but if the sword truly holds that much significance, then perhaps you would be better off keeping ahold of it? The three of you will need to find allies in Yoh upon your return, and bringing others around to the side of House Fujimiya will likely be easier with the sword on hand. In contrast, if the king in exile returns without the sword that legitimizes his reign, it seems likely that you'll be treated as nothing more than an upstart."

"R-Right! That's exactly what I've been trying to say this whole time!" said Rikuya. "What was your name—Rietz? You understand how all this works!"

"I'll admit that bearing the blade would make our task easier upon our return, but ours is a position that demands careful prioritization," said Maika. "We stand in a position of powerlessness, and as such, in our hands the sword is nothing more than a meaningless trinket. Were we to return to Yoh with nothing more than the sword in hand, the usurpers would claim it from us and bring our quest to an end. We will never stand a chance without the power to oppose our foes, and selling the sword is the fastest and most certain means to gain that power. Moreover, allies and legitimacy can both be won with power, whether or not we bear a symbol of our rule. You need look no further than the current government of Yoh to see that—they reign without the sword in hand, do they not?"

I could see Maika's point. Making the money they needed through hard work alone would be a challenge, and a time-consuming one, at that. I wasn't sure how long it had been since they were driven out of Yoh, but the more time passed, the more entrenched its current rulers would become, thus making it harder and harder for the Fujimiyas to regain control. It was in their best interests to gather up the forces they needed as quickly as possible.

"We have no certain means of restoring House Fujimiya to power. As such, our only option is to pick the path that grants us the highest odds of success," Maika concluded.

"Ugh..." Rikuya groaned, unable to come up with a counterargument. Still, some part of him seemed reluctant to sell the sword. I could tell just how much it meant to him. "But how am I supposed to call myself the head of House Fujimiya without it? If I sell the sword, not even I will be convinced my claim is legitimate," he added in a quiet mutter, glancing anxiously at the Wyrmsbane Blade.

"You mustn't be so timid, Brother. You are, without question, the head of House Fujimiya and the rightful king of Yoh. You and you alone bear a legitimate

claim to that title, whether or not that sword is in your hands. If you lose your drive to rid your kingdom of the pretender that sits upon your throne—if you lack the spirit to declare yourself king—then what will you have left?" scolded Maika, doing her best to raise Rikuya's spirits.

"I should note that if you were to become my retainers for a time, you would be able to reach your goals without having to part with your sword. Won't you reconsider your choice on that front? I believe the salary I would offer you is quite considerable, and if I'm able to strengthen my territory in the long term, I might even be able to provide you with troops to aid in your endeavor," I said.

This seemed like my best shot at soliciting them one more time. Of course, if I loaned them some of my troops and they managed to reclaim their own country, that would mean the end of their service. On the other hand, it would also mean that the king of a foreign nation would owe me a personal favor, which felt like a pretty big deal in its own right.

Rikuya paused for a moment to mull over my suggestion, then shook his head.

"No, I'm afraid not. My position as a member of Yoh's royalty does not allow me to enter into the service of another. Moreover, if I were to become your retainer and overthrow the government of Yoh, I would seem to be doing so on *your* behalf. That, in turn, would make Yoh a vassal state of the Summerforth Empire, would it not?"

"I, umm...think you might be overthinking this a little?" I suggested.

"No, no, he's right," said Maika. "That would indeed leave us with no recourse should you seek to claim Yoh as the property of House Louvent. You're quite the schemer for one so young and seemingly innocent, aren't you?"

"That's not what I was going for, I swear!" I shouted. I'd genuinely just been

thinking about forging friendly relationships, and had stumbled my way into a terrible misunderstanding in the process.

"I thought there would be little harm in becoming your retainers, at first, but in doing so I was being too eager to rely on the goodwill of others. If we can forge our own path to success, then that would be for the best," said Maika. Not only had I not won them over, it seemed that I'd lost the interest of the one Fujimiya who'd been open to the idea before.

"Come to think of it, you said you were planning on starting a business, didn't you? Are you confident that you can make it work?" I asked.

"Heh heh heh! With the funding we need, I am certain that all will proceed as planned... But I'm afraid I cannot share the details with you! I can't have you imitating my methods, after all!" said Maika.

She seemed very confident, but in a way that made me a little suspicious of what she was planning. I'd known someone in my previous life who had founded a business, claiming that there was no chance of it failing, only for the company to crumble, leaving my acquaintance under a mountain of debt in the process. I wasn't convinced that Maika would go down that same road, per se, but I was a little worried now.

"I don't mean to imply any ill will on your part, but I'm afraid that as the head of House Fujimiya, I cannot allow myself to enter your—or anyone's—service, barring the most extreme of circumstances," said Rikuya.

The last bit of his statement caught my attention. I wasn't sure what "the most extreme of circumstances" would entail, but one way or another, it was clear that bringing him around wouldn't be easy. I wanted as many talented individuals on my side as I could find, but in this case, it seemed my only choice was to give up.

"Now then, with that settled, we must talk of selling the Wyrmsbane Blade! Let's move this discussion along, shall we?" said Maika.

"W-Wait a second! Are we really selling it? Really?!" protested Rikuya.

"You understand that it's our only option, don't you?"

"Ugh..."

Once again, Rikuya sank into thought—this time for several minutes.

"I need some more time to think about this," he concluded.

Maika sighed.

"Must you be so confoundingly indecisive...?" she grumbled with a shake of her head.

As promised, we went on to introduce the three Fujimiyas to a potential workplace. They were almost entirely broke at the moment, so they needed to find some source of funding as soon as possible for the sake of putting food on the table.

We ended up finding an inn that was willing to hire them. Canarre's population was booming, and more and more travelers were arriving from outside of the county as a result. That meant an increase in demand for temporary lodgings, which had led to more and more new inns opening their doors. The already-existing businesses were doing their best to increase the scope of their operations, as well, so workers were in high demand.

The work at that sort of establishment largely consisted of manual labor, but inns also needed employees with a head for figures to handle the money, meaning that all three Fujimiyas would be able to do work that suited them in the same place. House Louvent had made efforts to support the local inns, so finding a place that would hire them with our endorsement was quite easy. Things went so smoothly, in fact, that by the time our talks were finished they were scheduled to begin working the very next day.

"So I'm to work as an underling at an inn...? I suppose beggars can't be choosers," Maika grumbled. Considering the fact that she was former royalty, I couldn't blame her for being upset.

"Thank you for giving us this opportunity. I swear that we will repay this debt someday," said Rikuya.

"Indeed!" piped up Maika. "If our business goes as planned, we'll likely choose Canarre as our base of operations. When that time comes, we will assuredly pay you back!"

"I have a feeling that might take a while," I replied.

"It will *not*! We shall repay our debts before you know it! And we'll be back to discuss our sale of the sword in short order, as well!"

"Understood," I said.

With that, the Fujimiyas departed from Castle Canarre. It seemed there was little hope of recruiting them as my retainers, but if they had a positive effect on the state of the city of Canarre independently, then introducing them to a job seemed well worth the effort. I had high hopes things would turn out for the best.

Some time later, the Fujimiya siblings found themselves in the room that their live-in job had provided them. Their work for the day was finished, and they were taking the opportunity to rest.

"Ughh, I am exhausted! This was not part of the deal we reached! I was under the distinct impression I would *not* be asked to do manual labor, and look how long that lasted!" Maika shouted. Her exhaustion had put her in a paradoxically high-strung state of mind. She had indeed been hired to do clerical work, in theory, but the inn had had so many customers that evening that she'd been pulled away from her calculations and asked to wait tables, clean, and even do a smattering of heavy lifting.

"Was it really that bad? We're getting fed, so I'm super satisfied. I wish I could work here forever," said Takao, who seemed more pleased than tired. The owner of the inn had provided him with an extra-large meal to reward him for his hard work, and apparently, that was all it took to sell him on the arrangement.

"Don't even joke about that," snapped Maika. "Our goal is to quit this job and attain independence as soon as possible! We seek to accomplish an outrageous objective, and every minute we spend gaining funds and seeking out troops lowers the chances of our invasion succeeding. The fact that the Count of Canarre has acknowledged our talents is a boon—it's possible that he might support us if we try to establish our enterprise in this city. I don't like the thought of seeking his aid over and over, but beggars can't be choosers. In any case, our plans will begin in earnest whenever our brother decides to sell the Wyrmsbane Blade," Maika concluded as she glanced over at Rikuya, who was still mulling over his options as he stared at his sword.

"Hmm..." muttered Rikuya. "Are we sure about this, though...?"

"I think we should sell it too," said Takao. "People in town have been giving it weird looks."

"Weird looks?" said Rikuya. "Do you mean that they were thinking about stealing it? You've always had a pretty good sense for these things."

Takao's strength wasn't his only asset in battle. He also boasted remarkable instincts, which among other things bolstered his defenses, making him a force to be reckoned with.

"It's clearly valuable, after all," said Maika. "In that sense, it may be in our best interests to rid ourselves of it posthaste."

"How would anyone even steal it from us, though?" asked Rikuya. "I'm always carrying it with me, and if someone tried to take it from us by force, Takao and I could surely drive them off. It wouldn't be the first time we've had to defend ourselves."

The Fujimiya siblings had been thrust into danger a number of times since arriving in Summerforth. Each time, however, they had pooled their strengths and overcome the challenges that faced them.

"It's dangerous to assume that because all has gone well up until now, all will go well in the future. Some men will go so far as to kill for money, and dying to protect the blade would be the height of pointlessness," said Maika.

"I know that, but still," Rikuya sighed as he gazed at his sword. "To be honest, I've started to think that it'd be for the best to sell it as well. Without this blade in my hands I'll be nothing more than a commoner, but that will not change the fact that the blood of the Fujimiyas flows through my veins. I would not be able to stand proud and declare myself the head of House Fujimiya without the blade...but that is a problem that I must overcome, whether or not I part with

"Precisely," said Maika. "Whether in Yoh or Summerforth, those who hold power hold the right to deem what is just. Such is the nature of the era we live in—to show weakness is to invite death. Perhaps you alone do not stand a chance against the monsters who brought House Fujimiya to ruin, Brother, but with all three of our powers combined, we can overthrow them even without the Wyrmsbane Blade. Is that not so, Takao?"

"Yeah," said Takao. "And then we'll be able to eat all we want, and sleep like logs."

"That...is not precisely the reassurance I had in mind, but it will suffice."

"Maika, Takao," Rikuya muttered, his gaze full of emotion as he looked upon his siblings. Finally, he seemed to make up his mind. "All right. I'll do it. I'll sell the sword!"

"Very well!" said Maika. "In that case, no need to hesitate—let us make for Castle Canarre tomorrow! The count's people are trustworthy, and will surely find a buyer for us."

"Agreed," said Rikuya. "I don't even want to think about how badly we'd get ripped off if we tried to sell it to some random merchant."

"And lots of money will mean lots of food," said Takao.

"You should know, Takao, that the money from selling the blade will all go into our enterprise's warchest! We won't be using so much as a coin from it to buy food," said Maika.

"What?!" Takao gasped, a look of shock and horror passing across his face.

"Okay, it's not quite that bad. We can splurge on some nice food at least once, right?" said Rikuya in an effort to console his brother. A moment later, he

glanced over at the room's window, a suspicious expression coming across his face. "Hmm...?"

"What is it, Brother?" asked Maika.

"I'm not sure. I thought I saw something moving outside for a moment..."

"Hmm... Perhaps we're being spied upon. Did you notice anything, Takao?"

"I wasn't paying attention to the window, so I dunno."

"Fair enough," said Rikuya. "It's possible we're being targeted by a burglar, so keep your guard up."

Takao nodded, his expression resolute.

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A report arrived at my office in Castle Canarre.

"It seems the Fujimiya siblings are hard at work in the inn we introduced them to," said Rietz.

"Oh? That's good to hear," I replied.

"That being said, I do have some concerns," Rietz continued. "For one thing, the sword in Rikuya's possession strikes me as far too valuable for a normal person to carry around."

"True enough," I said. "Takao seemed pretty tough, but if enough people jumped them at once, there's a chance they wouldn't be able to fight their way out of it no matter how capable he is."

We'd taken steps to impose harsh penalties on crime and had bolstered the

town guard in Canarre as well, which had helped improve the state of public order on the whole. Still, we hadn't cleared the bandits out of the county, so crime was a factor we had to pay attention to. The Wyrmsbane Blade, meanwhile, was so conspicuously valuable that it was easy to imagine a criminal setting their sights upon it.

"Oh, and I also have a report from Pham," Rietz continued. "I believe that you'll want to hear this, if you have a moment."

"From Pham? Go ahead," I said.

"We had requested that Pham and the Shadows investigate a gang of thieves that have been on something of a spree in Canarre as of late. However, it seems that in spite of their capabilities, the Shadows have been unable to catch any of them in the act. They've speculated that the thieves may be in possession of some sort of magical tool that's enabling their exploits."

This was the first that I'd heard of Pham's crew investigating a local band of thieves. I would have thought that tracking down petty criminals like them would have been a simple feat for the Shadows, and was surprised to hear that it hadn't been going well. Apparently, their opponents this time around were more skilled than expected.

The mention of a mysterious magic tool, however, is what caught my attention. The rate of progress in Summerforth's magical technology was rapid enough that figuring out who had made it would be a lost cause—magical tools of unknown origin seemed to be everywhere, as of late. Most of them were junk, and catalyzers were the only tool that had found any use on the field of battle so far, but every once in a while a tool turned up that had real, practical use. If this band of thieves had one of those tools in their possession and was using it to throw the Shadows off their tail, then tracking them down might be a

difficult task indeed.

"Do they have any idea what sort of tool it might be?" I asked.

"One that eliminates all noise made by the user, apparently," replied Rietz.

I was by no means an expert on magical theory, but that sounded like an application of sound magic, if I had to hazard a guess. Regardless, being able to muffle the noises you made would make burglary far easier.

"Several dozen break-ins have been reported so far," Rietz continued. "The Shadows' intent is to put more personnel on this case and expand the range of their investigations."

"I just hope they track the thieves down quickly," I said.

Come to think of it, if a band of thieves who're that capable are operating in Canarre, wouldn't that put the Fujimiyas in a pretty dangerous spot? I made a mental note to send them a warning when I had the chance.

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Late that night, Takao's eyes shot open as he sensed a presence in the room he was sleeping in.

Somebody just snuck in, he thought to himself. Two somebodies, in fact. It was too dark for him to discern their ages or sexes, and they weren't making any sounds in particular. Takao had only been able to notice them thanks to his almost superhuman sense for the space around him. Rikuya and Maika had yet to realize that anything was wrong. Both of them were still sound asleep, judging by the rhythm of their breathing.

He could tell that the intruders were making their way toward Rikuya, and the instant they stepped within Takao's reach, he shot up from his bed and tackled them at a speed one wouldn't think possible for a man of his size. Takao was a large, powerful man, but he wasn't slow by any means. Speed was one of his greatest assets. His athleticism was exceptional across the board.

Takao's wild charge sent the intruders crashing into the wall. It was a solid blow, and their impact with the wall was substantial, but it hadn't made the slightest noise. Takao thought that was strange, but didn't bother trying to figure out what it meant. Fighting was his wheelhouse—thinking, not so much.

Despite having been sent flying halfway across the room, the intruders were back on their feet in no time. Takao, it seemed, wasn't the only exceptional fighter in the room. They took up combat stances, drawing knives from hiding places in their clothing.

Takao was unarmed, but he didn't flinch away from his assailants' blades. He was a master of barehanded combat, and was confident that he could easily bring down an armed opponent, so he didn't hesitate to square off against the intruders and prepare for a fight.

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"What in the...?" Rikuya muttered as Takao's tackle roused him from his slumber. He sat up, blearily looking around the room, then took in a sharp breath, his eyes shooting open in alarm. It was quite dark, but what little light there was in the room was enough for him to make out the intruders.

Rikuya grabbed the Wyrmsbane Blade in a flash, shooting to his feet, drawing

the sword, and taking up a combat stance. He did not, however, immediately attack. With his vision impaired due to the lack of light, a careless strike could turn into a miss, leaving him open to counterattack. As sudden as the incursion was, Rikuya was capable of keeping cool-headed enough to move with prudence and not set himself up for failure.

For a moment, both sides stared each other down. Finally, the trespassers made the first move, aiming not for Rikuya or Takao, but rather Maika, who was still fast asleep. They made a beeline toward her, as if they could see with perfect clarity despite the near-total darkness. Clearly, they were used to operating in the dark.

Rikuya and Takao had both expected the enemy to come at them, and were caught off guard by the unexpected move. Their reactions came at a slight delay, and though Rikuya caught on quickly enough to try to stop them, he wasn't quite fast enough. One of the intruders had already pressed their knife to Maika's throat. A moment later, they pulled some sort of magical tool out from a pocket, fiddled with it, then began to speak.

"Freeze," the intruder said in a seemingly male voice. "I think you know what's gonna happen if either of you so much as twitch."

Takao and Rikuya's expressions stiffened. Maika, meanwhile, had finally woken up, and the knife pressed to her neck along with the intruder's words filled her in on the pertinent details of the situation. A look of panic flashed across her face.

"We'll start easy-hand over the sword," said the intruder.

Rikuya drew in a sharp breath, his eyes widening. The unstated implication was clear: if he didn't surrender the sword, Maika's life would be forfeit.

"Don't give it to him, Brother," Maika said, her expression now resolved. "We have no reason to think he'll spare me, even if you do hand it over!"

"Oh, I will, all right. If I kill you, then that monster might take the both of us out," said the intruder as he glanced at Takao. "I'm not convinced we could take him, even two on one. Plus, I'm not saying we'll let you go once we have the sword. One way or another, you three will be following our orders for the time being," he added in a firm and confident tone. He knew how valuable of a hostage Maika was—apparently, he'd looked into them in advance.

"Understood. We'll do as you say," said Rikuya.

"Brother..." Maika muttered.

Rikuya had no intention to take Maika's advice this time. Going along with their assailants' orders seemed less than likely to guarantee his and his siblings' eventual release. The intruders would want to leave as little evidence of their crime as possible, after all, so the odds that all three of them would be killed after they gave up the sword seemed rather high. If he chose to give up on Maika, keep the sword, and fight back, then he and Takao, at least, would likely survive...but in Rikuya's mind, losing Maika wasn't an option. He chose to risk all three of their lives to save hers in the moment, and held out the sword to his attackers.

"Smart move," said one of the intruders as he took the sword.

"So, what do we do with 'em now? Kill 'em?" asked the other.

"We're thieves, not murderers. We don't kill unless we've got no other option. We'll take them back to the hideout and throw them in a cell, to start. We can talk it out with the boss after that. The big one should fetch a nice price as a slave, at least...and hey, maybe we'll even be able to ransom them to their

relatives. You never know," said the first intruder, his tone calm and collected. "For now, tie the big one's hands. You hear that? Not a move from you!"

The thief who was closer to Takao brought out a length of rope and bound his hands behind his back.

"All right, now follow us," said the first intruder. With Maika still held hostage, the Fujimiyas had no choice but to obey. Rikuya kept quiet and followed his attackers.

The Fujimiyas and their captors left the inn and made their way through the city streets. Not many people were out and about at this time of night, but the fact that thieves had been operating within the city had the town guard patrolling in greater numbers than usual. The thieves, however, seemed to have a reasonable idea of where the guards would be stationed. Between that and their sound-erasing magical tool, they managed to evade the patrols.

Maika was still being held at knifepoint, meaning that Rikuya and Takao couldn't raise the alarm without risking her life. Even if they'd been willing to try, it seemed that the magic tool muffled not only noises made by the user, but by anyone else in the immediate vicinity as well. Rikuya couldn't make any loud noises, even if he wanted to. In the end, he and his siblings were brought to the thieves' hideout without being discovered by the guards.

0

I went out to warn the Fujimiyas about the recent string of burglaries in Canarre, only to be informed by the innkeeper that all three of them had vanished. One evening they'd gone to bed, and the next morning they were gone without a trace, leaving the innkeeper under the impression that they'd run out on him. That had left the innkeeper at a lack of manual laborers, and he was all too eager to come complaining to House Louvent about the issue. Thankfully, Rietz had taken care of that problem by dispatching some of the castle's servants to help out until we could find replacements.

"Do you really think the three of them ran away, though?" I wondered out loud. Rikuya had seemed to be motivated, from my perspective, and the other two had made a point of following his directions. If he'd dedicated himself to his work, I was certain they would have as well. It would be one thing if they'd vanished after a few months, but it had only been a matter of days. Them running away after that short a span of time just didn't make sense, considering their attitudes.

"I wonder about that as well," said Rietz. "The inn in question only just opened its doors, and the workload was apparently rather heavy, but they still didn't strike me as the sort of people who would steal away in the night without a word."

"That's what I was thinking," I said.

"Still, if they didn't run away, what could explain their absence?"

"I guess...they might've been kidnapped?"

"There were no signs of a disturbance in their room, though. It wasn't left in perfect order, apparently, but not to an unusual degree for a room that was occupied."

"Hmm... Takao and Rikuya both know how to fight, so if there had been a struggle, you'd think there'd at least be a few bloodstains...and the innkeeper

would've heard something if there'd been a fight, too," I stated.

Considering what we knew, assuming that they'd left on their own initiative did seem the most reasonable conclusion. Rikuya had struck me as a motivated worker, but he was also former royalty. He might have decided that lowly work like he'd been asked to do was demeaning.

"Put out a search for them, just in case," I ordered. "For all we know, they might've been caught up in some sort of trouble...though if they did run away, then they're probably long gone from Canarre, I guess."

"Understood," said Rietz.

0

"I wonder what's going to happen to us...?" Rikuya muttered to himself. At the same moment Ars was speculating about what had become of the Fujimiyas, Rikuya and his siblings found themselves locked up in a cell in the thieves' hideout.

"Perhaps we'll be saved...but I wouldn't put money on it," Maika replied with an air of resignation.

The thieves' hideout was located in a rough part of Canarre. From the outside it looked like an ordinary dwelling, but the building featured an expansive basement containing both a jail and a warehouse where the thieves stored their ill-begotten loot until they were able to fence it. The entrance to the basement was well-hidden, and was unlikely to be discovered anytime soon. In other words, it would be very difficult for anyone to get in and find the prisoners who were kept there.

"I'm starving," Takao groaned, his stomach rumbling at the same moment. They had been fed, technically, but they'd each been given little more than a slice of bread, which wasn't anywhere near enough to satisfy Takao's appetite.

"You should have abandoned me, Brother," said Maika. "At least then two of us would have remained free."

"D-Don't even start! You know I could never leave you to die!" Rikuya snapped back.

"You *must* be able to if the need arises! It would have been the most rational and effective choice to make. A king must be capable of making the right decision when the time comes, no matter how cold or callous that decision may seem."

"I don't care how rational it might be—if being a king means having to leave my sister to die, then they can *keep* the damn throne for all I care!" Rikuya shouted.

Maika shook her head and let out an exasperated sigh. "You are far too soft, Brother...but I suppose I must thank you for saving my life, regardless of the consequences. I would, for the record, prefer not to die if at all possible," she added, her tone growing bashful.

"You should have opened with that," grumbled Rikuya as he mussed up Maika's hair.

"S-Stop that! You know full well that I'm not a child anymore!" Maika shouted. Her face flushed red as she shook off Rikuya's hand.

"I'm so hungry..." Takao moaned. He hadn't been paying any attention to his siblings' exchange, and was slumped over on the floor.



"Hey there," a voice rang out. It came without warning from outside of the cell, and the Fujimiya siblings reflexively turned to look in its direction.

A tall man with a narrow face stood outside the cell. His hair was carefully styled, with facial hair that was equally well-groomed. Even his clothes were clean and proper. At a glance, he looked more like a well-off merchant than a burglar.

I know that man, Rikuya thought to himself. He'd caught a glimpse of the burglar back when they had arrived at the hideout. The other thieves had called him "boss," which made his position in their organization rather clear.

"So, tell me—do you have any relatives with some spare cash on hand? We'd be happy to return you to them safe and sound, if a big enough ransom's on the table," said the man.

Rikuya paused to think. He had been chased out of his nation, and so for all intents and purposes, he had no relatives to speak of at all. Nobody other than his siblings had accompanied him to Summerforth. Plus, he wasn't close enough to the owner of the inn he'd been working at to expect the man to pay a ransom.

The only person Rikuya could think of who may have fit the bill was Ars. He had seemed to value Rikuya and his siblings' talents, so there was at least some small chance that he'd be willing to pay a ransom to guarantee their safety. Even so, Rikuya couldn't bring himself to bring up Ars's name. In his mind, to do so would have been to trouble a man who had already gone out of his way to help him.

"None," Rikuya finally replied.

"Oh, really?" said the man. "Strange, considering the sword you were

carrying. I have a hard time believing you could get your hands on something like that without connections to someone well-to-do."

"We stole that sword back in our homeland. We ended up here because we had to flee the authorities," Rikuya replied. He had a feeling that revealing his true status would be a terrible idea, and chose to lie instead.

"Oh, so that thing's stolen goods? Who knew! Guess I should've expected you to be a pauper, considering you were working at an inn. I figured that if foreigners like you had family, they'd be willing to pay a pretty penny for you. Foreign folks in Summerforth tend to stick together, you know?" said the man with a disappointed shake of his head.

"What did you do with the sword?" asked Rikuya.

"Sold it, of course. Got a pretty decent price for it, too. Now we just have to figure out what to do with you," the thieves' boss said before pausing to think. "I'm leaning toward selling you as slaves. It's the only good option. The kid's gonna be a tough sell...but then again, she's got a decent enough face, and some buyers are the sorta freaks who like 'em young."

"What do you mean by that?" asked Maika. Her expression indicated that she didn't understand what the thieves' boss was insinuating. Having been raised as royalty, her knowledge regarding the more vulgar side of society was lacking—or, rather, nonexistent.

"The big guy'll fetch a good price, at least," the boss continued, ignoring Maika's question. "I know a noble who was just looking for a tough fighter-type the other day."

An establishment in the duchy of Ansel had made a business out of pitting the strongest slaves they could find against each other in combat, inviting in large

audiences to watch and bet on the bloodbath. As a result, slaves who could fight were in high demand.

"Hey, you can fight, right? How good are you?" asked the boss.

"I'm hungry..." Takao groaned in reply.

"Figure it'd take at least two guys at once to take you down, eh?"

"I'm hungry..."

"What, too good to talk to me, is that it?"

"When he gets hungry, he never talks about anything else. He can't, really," Rikuya explained.

"The hell? Well, whatever. He looks piss-weak right now, and we can't let him go dragging down his price on us. Hey! Bring some food over—lots of it!" the boss shouted.

"Comin' up!" one of his underlings replied.

Before long, a towering pile of meat and bread was brought into the cell. Takao's eyes shone with excitement as he dug in without hesitation.

"Hey, Brother-these people might be nice after all!" said Takao after he'd finished his meal.

"They most certainly are not! They're planning to sell us, you know?!" snapped Rikuya.

"That just leaves you," the boss said, looking to Rikuya next. "You look...huh. What is your deal? Can't say you look particularly remarkable in any real way... but you're a man, I guess, so we can sell you off for manual labor, or whatever."

"Hey! You could at least put a little more thought into it!" Rikuya shouted indignantly. Being called unremarkable by a burglar, of all people, had touched

a very sensitive nerve.

"It's gonna take a little while to get all the preparations for selling you done, so we'll be keeping you here for a while. Don't go trying to escape now, you hear? Make one move toward breaking out, and we'll kill you on the spot," the boss said with a dangerous glint in his eyes before going on his way.

It looks like we'll be making it out of here alive, at least... But on the other hand, we'll be sold to different places. Sounds like they'll be using Takao as a fighter, and Maika as...ugh, Rikuya thought, trying not to dwell on what the future had in store for his sister.

Rikuya didn't know for sure where he'd be sold, but if he was to be used for manual labor, then the odds were decent his conditions wouldn't be unbearable. The same could not be said for his siblings, though. No matter how capable a warrior Takao was, he could only go up against so many worthy opponents before his luck ran out and he was killed or maimed. Maika, on the other hand, could very well be sold into such terrible circumstances that death would be the far preferable option.

It looks like breaking out's our only option, then. But how...?

The burglars had guards constantly stationed outside the cell, with no gaps between their shifts, and Rikuya saw little reason to doubt their boss's words. They seemed prepared to kill their prisoners at the first sign of defiance. Even if he and his siblings made it out of their cell, escaping the building would be a tall order. There were just too many criminals around for them to slip out unnoticed, and though Takao was a capable unarmed fighter, he couldn't take on that many opponents at once and emerge victorious.

We'll get our chance, though, one way or another. Panicking and trying to force a breakout will just set us back. I have to wait for an opportunity, and be

prepared to take it when it arrives.

Having concluded that there was nothing he could do for the time being, Rikuya decided to keep calm and settled in for a long wait.

0

A few days had passed since the Fujimiya siblings had disappeared. Our search had turned up no leads at all in that time, so we ended up calling it off. We had other pressing matters—like the string of burglaries in Canarre—to take care of, so devoting resources to looking for them when the odds were good they weren't even in town anymore just didn't feel worthwhile. For all I knew, I might never see them again...or so I thought, until a chance encounter turned the situation on its head.

"It seems a merchant has requested an audience with you, Lord Ars. Will you meet with him?" asked Rietz.

A merchant...? I thought to myself. This wouldn't be the first time a businessperson had arrived at the castle in the hopes of selling me something. I generally preferred to leave that sort of decision up to Rietz, but the purchase of anything pricey required me to sign off on it, so I often tagged along for the talks with the merchants for simplicity's sake.

When merchants showed up, they usually came bearing rare magical tools or works of art to show me. Some of the tools they'd brought in the past had been quite handy for my day-to-day lifestyle, and I'd made a point of picking up the ones that looked particularly useful. Art, on the other hand, wasn't something that interested me, so I rarely bothered with those. They were expensive

anyway, so I wouldn't have been able to afford many of them regardless. That being said, I'd been thinking about how forging deeper ties with other nobles would be a diplomatic necessity recently, and I knew that giving works of art as presents would be a good way of demonstrating my friendship. Our finances were doing a little better than before, so I figured it might be the right time to start snapping the occasional art piece up.

I had the merchant shown into Castle Canarre's parlor, where I met with him. This time, he turned out to be a man with an amiable expression who looked like he was in his thirties, or thereabouts.

"A pleasure to meet you! My name is Thoenes Camchar," said the merchant. "I am a merchant based out of Canarre, and I've recently come across a very unusual item. I knew at once I had to give our fair city's count the opportunity to make it his own, and came here with all due haste to show it to you!"

I'd heard the merchant's name before, but I'd never met him myself until now. Canarre was bustling with merchants these days, so I hadn't come even close to putting names to all of their faces yet.

Thoenes set a long, slender box down on the table before him, then removed its lid. My eyes widened with shock as I glanced inside, and when I looked over at Rietz, I found that he looked just as astonished. I didn't exactly need to ask why.

"I'm inclined to believe that this blade was forged by a foreign craftsman! Inspect, if you will, the intricate design of its scabbard. That's real gold, you know, and...er... Your Lordship? I see you're quite enraptured by the sword—has it caught your interest, perhaps?"

There was indeed a sword within the box, and a sword that Rietz and I couldn't tear our eyes away from. We weren't entranced by its beauty, to be

clear. No, we were stunned by the fact that it was, beyond a shadow of a doubt, Rikuya's Wyrmsbane Blade. The sword was so distinctive that there was no mistaking it, and the idea that another sword that looked just like it had made its way to Canarre was unthinkable.

The question, then, was how it had ended up in a merchant's hands. Had the Fujimiyas decided to sell it? If so, why hadn't they contacted us in the hopes of finding the buyer who would give them the best possible price for it? Maika had expressed her intention of doing just that.

I wasn't judging them for selling to a local merchant, per se. Putting a proper price on it would require dedicating a fair amount of time to asking around and seeing how much various buyers would be willing to pay. Selling it to the first merchant they came across seemed like a bit of a waste in terms of profit, but if they needed money as soon as possible, it was a reasonable choice to make.

However, Maika's goal had been to establish a business of her own, and she'd wanted every scrap of coin that she could get her hands on in order to do it. Considering that, it seemed very unlikely that she'd choose speed over profit, whether or not she asked for House Louvent's help in finding a buyer. The alternative, then, was a simple assumption: the sword had been stolen.

No sooner had the thought crossed my mind than Rietz spoke up to ask the same question I wanted an answer to.

"Who did you obtain this blade from?" he asked, his tone and expression considerably harsh. Suddenly, our negotiations had turned into an interrogation.

The merchant picked up on the shift in tone and seemed aware that this was no trivial matter.

"U-Umm," he stammered anxiously, "I purchased it from another merchant in Canarre named Mister Lobke! It seems he's fallen on hard times and was willing to let it go for a very reasonable price, so I snapped it up without a second thought."

"Lobke... Is he a rather heavyset man who runs a shop in Canarre's southern district?" asked Rietz.

"Yes! Th-That's the man...but, um, I must ask—is something the matter with this sword?"

"There's a very high chance that it's stolen goods. We'll be conducting an investigation, just to be safe."

"S-Stolen goods?!" the merchant shrieked.

The buying and selling of stolen goods was, needless to say, prohibited by law in Canarre. Those who were taken advantage of and inadvertently dealt in such items weren't punished, but anyone who refused to cooperate with an investigation was assumed complicit by default. In other words, a merchant who bought a stolen item unknowingly would have to cooperate, no matter how unfair the investigation seemed to them. And because burglars were a thorn in the side of legitimate merchants, very few of them protested the current state of the law.

"V-Very well, then," said Thoenes, who had gone deathly pale. "I'll tell you everything I know about the sword, but before we begin, I want to make it very clear that I had no clue it had been obtained illegitimately! I swear on my honor, Your Lordship!"

"We understand," Rietz replied reassuringly. "And to be clear, we have yet to confirm the sword was stolen to begin with. This is just a suspicion, for now-a

full investigation will determine the truth."

Thoenes went on to tell us everything he knew, which admittedly wasn't all that much. He'd purchased the sword from Lobke for eighty gold coins, it seemed, implying that Lobke had paid even less than that.

That news deepened our already-roused suspicions. Rietz had priced the sword at a hundred gold coins, minimum, and it was very difficult to believe that the Fujimiyas had willingly sold it for less than that. On the other hand, if the sword had been stolen, then the thieves would have been motivated to get it out of their hands as soon as possible. It was very common for goods of unclear worth to be sold for well below their true value as a matter of expediency.

"What do you think, Rietz? Was it really stolen, or did Rikuya sell it himself?" I asked.

"Hmm... Considering what we know, I think it was stolen. I was suspicious when I'd heard that they'd fled in the night to begin with—none of them struck me as the sort of people who would do such a thing," Rietz replied. It seemed he'd had the same hunch as I had. "Operating under the assumption that it was stolen, it seems likely that the culprits were the same burglars we've been attempting to apprehend. There was no evidence that a robbery took place, and the band we're seeking has a history of leaving no evidence behind, so the pieces seem to fit together. In other words, even not taking the fate of the Fujimiyas into account, I see this as an opportunity for us to bring the burglars to justice."

"Good point," I said. "But what do you think happened to the three of them?"

"It's possible that they were kidnapped, or—much as I hate to consider it—killed. Though to be fair, the burglars don't have a history of murder, so I would be surprised if that were the case. It's possible that there are factors at play we aren't even considering, of course."

"If the sword was stolen, do you think there's a chance that the Fujimiyas decided to go get it back themselves?"

"Given the complete lack of sightings reported during our search, I would say that's extremely unlikely. The three of them stand out enough that if they were investigating the burglars, someone would have noticed."

That seemed reasonable enough to me...which, unfortunately, left them having been kidnapped or killed the only plausible explanations.

"There were no signs of a struggle in the inn, so it's difficult to imagine they were killed on the spot," said Rietz. "In other words, we can assume they were abducted for some period of time, at the very least—and if that's the case, then their captors would benefit far more by selling them than killing them. As such, I believe they're still alive."

That logic checked out with me...or at least, I wanted to believe it was the case. "One way or another, we have to find these burglars fast. Can I leave that to you, Rietz?"

"Of course. I'll contact the Shadows and begin an investigation at once," Rietz replied, then left to get to work on the double.

burglars' cell, and he still had yet to reach a decision regarding what his next move should be. Their captors had proven even more vigilant than expected, and their cell was kept constantly under watch.

Eventually, Rikuya conferred with Maika with a whisper. Unfortunately, she had yet to come up with any ideas either, beyond staying quiet and biding time until an opportunity presented itself. Rikuya knew, however, that the longer they waited, the more likely they would be split apart and sent their separate ways. That, above all else, was an outcome he wanted to avoid.

I never want to lose another family member. Never again, Rikuya thought as the memories of what had happened back in Yoh resurfaced in his mind.

Ever since the era in which his grandfather ruled over the nation, House Fujimiya had been in a state of gradual decline. Rikuya's grandfather was by no means a bad person, but as a monarch, he had proven lacking. He was as indecisive as a person could be, and that trait proved detrimental to his ability to rule. Furthermore, he was far too kindhearted a man to dispatch the sort of judgments that effective rulers needed to on occasion. His vassals' disobedience remained unpunished, in all but the lightest of senses.

Under the reign of Rikuya's grandfather, the lords who ruled over the various regions of Yoh were able to amass more and more power and influence of their own. By the time Rikuya's grandfather passed on and his father ascended to the throne, House Fujimiya had already lost the respect of its followers.

Rikuya's father could hardly have been more different from the previous king. He was a bold and decisive man who excelled when it came to taking the initiative, and immediately sought to reassert control over the nation and bring the uppity nobility back under control. That, however, proved to be a fatal mistake—the policies he attempted to put into place sowed the seeds of

rebellion, and all of Yoh was soon embroiled in an age of vicious warfare.

Those were the troubled times that Rikuya had been born into. Being royalty he was just one of many siblings, and being on the younger side, he had not received the sort of education one would give to the heir apparent. Instead, he had been trained to support whichever elder sibling wound up inheriting the throne. Rikuya never doubted that that was the role he would one day fall into...until the war grew in intensity, and the Fujimiyas found themselves at a lack of commanding officers.

One by one, Rikuya's brothers—each a capable warrior in his own right—were called into battle, and one by one, they met their ends at the rebels' blades. Rikuya was close with his siblings, and the pain of losing them never lessened. Each death carved a gash into his heart that would never heal.

As time wore on, House Fujimiya found itself fighting a losing war. Ultimately, their final stronghold was surrounded by the enemy forces. The castle featured a secret escape route known only to the king and his family, but Rikuya's father chose not to use it. He would perish when the castle fell, instead giving his royal blade to Rikuya and urging him, along with Takao and Maika, to escape in his stead. At the king's order the three siblings fled through the secret passage, boarded a boat, and escaped from Yoh altogether.

At the time of their escape, a number of the Fujimiya trio's elder sisters were still alive. They had decided among themselves, however, that the more people who fled the more likely they were to be caught en route, and had resolved to send only the three youngest among them away. That left Rikuya with a profound guilt weighing upon his conscience. He had argued with all his might against the decision, not wanting the three of them to be the only ones left alive, but in the end he'd been unable to convince his other sisters to

accompany him.

Traveling through the secret passage, of course, wasn't enough to ward off pursuit. The journey from the castle to the ocean was fraught with close calls with groups of soldiers who were searching for Rikuya and his siblings, and they just barely managed to reach the coast and board a ship sailing for Summerforth. Their lives had been saved...but all of their older siblings, along with their parents, had been slain.

Rikuya was hellbent on protecting Maika and Takao, come what may. He was more than willing to sacrifice himself for their sake, and in that light, he'd managed to come up with just one plan. Putting it into action would likely doom him...but at the very least, it could save his siblings.

"Abandon that line of thought, Brother," said Maika. She'd been watching his expression, and seemed to have seen through what he was planning.

"I wasn't—" Rikuya began, then reconsidered. "Look, you said it yourself, didn't you? It's more logical to sacrifice one of us than to let all three of us get captured and killed."

"That was a circumstantial truth, not a universal one. More to the point, you are the only one of us who cannot be sacrificed, no matter the circumstances. You have to live on and become king."

"Why me? Why can't you be king?"

"Because I'm a woman, obviously."

"Okay, then what about Takao?"

"Do you truly believe he's up to the task?"

RIkuya glanced over at Takao. The burglars had just delivered their food, and Takao returned Rikuya's gaze with a satisfied, complacent grin. Rikuya had to

admit that it was very hard to imagine his brother serving as a monarch after seeing him in this light.

"You are the only one of us who can fill the role, Brother. Neither Takao nor I can become king and carry on House Fujimiya's legacy," Maika stated definitively.

"Well, you know what? I can't either," Rikuya muttered.

"Brother...that's not-"

"It's true, and you know it as well as I do. I don't have what it takes. Even if I did have the talent to rule, it's far beyond me to overthrow Yoh's current rulers and reclaim the throne! I know you understand that!"

Maika didn't say a word. She couldn't bring herself to disagree. As a member of House Fujimiya, spending the rest of her life in Summerforth would be unbearable. She'd mulled over plan after plan to return to her homeland and reinstate her house's rule, but in truth, she was well aware that the obstacles that stood between her and the accomplishment of that objective were close to insurmountable.

"The one thing I can do is make sure my brother and sister survive. Won't you allow me even that much, at the end of it all?" asked Rikuya.

"The end...? Of course I couldn't," Maika replied with a sharp glare. "To start, sacrificing yourself wouldn't be enough to turn this situation around for the two of us. You would die in vain."

"I wouldn't be so sure about that," Rikuya said, then explained the plan he'd come up with.

"Hmm. I would have rather you kept that idea to yourself," Maika said indignantly after Rikuya had finished.

"It might work, though, don't you think?" replied Rikuya. "I might die, sure, but the two of you would make it out alive."

"Only in the best case. In the worst, all three of us would perish—and that's far and away the most likely outcome."

"I guess, but if we don't do something, all three of us are gonna be sold as slaves."

"And being enslaved is better than being dead."

"Are you sure? Being a slave means having your dignity and humanity stripped away from you. Does that even count as living, in your book?"

"I happen to value my life over my dignity," said Maika, though her tone lacked its usual self-assuredness. She had a pretty good idea of the sort of horrors and indignities that a life of slavery would entail.

"A life in slavery for me would be one thing, but you and Takao could end up in situations so terrible, I don't even want to think about them. I can't risk that happening. No decent brother would ever allow it," said Rikuya.

"They claimed they would have Takao fight for sport, did they not? I can see your point, in his case—a life of combat is no easy thing, and he may not even last a year, if worse comes to worst. My case, however, confuses me. What did he mean that 'freaks' would be interested in me? What would they have me do?" asked Maika.

"You, uh...don't want to know," Rikuya muttered. "And I'm not letting it happen, so you don't need to know, either."

"Wh-What could that possibly mean...? I'm more curious than ever now!" Maika asked apprehensively. The grave look on Rikuya's face wasn't doing her nerves any favors. "I-In any case, I cannot endorse a plan that leaves you to be

sacrificed, Brother. On this, I will not budge!"

"Sister?" said Takao, who'd been happily stuffing his face until just a moment beforehand.

"What is it, Takao? I don't have any food for you, if that's what you're wondering," replied Maika.

"No, not that. We made a promise when we left Yoh, didn't we? We agreed that we'd do what our brother tells us to as much as possible."

Rikuya and Maika were both gobsmacked. They'd been expecting Takao to ask about food, not to join the conversation with a very serious interjection.

"That's right, you did! So keep your promise, already!"

"Y-You're forgetting the most important part! We promised to obey his word, except for cases where his judgment is plainly mistaken!"

"So that's what you'd call this? You think I'm making an unambiguous mistake?"

"Ugh," Maika grunted, unable to refute Rikuya's argument. The truth was that she couldn't make any such claim whatsoever, but she wasn't ready to give up yet. "Listen to me, Takao. Wouldn't you be sad if our brother perished?"

"I would, yeah, but it's his decision, right? If he thinks this is for the best, I'll do it. I'm too stupid to figure these things out, so I think that's the right choice," Takao stated. His expression was grief stricken, but his absolute faith in Rikuya had overruled his emotions.

"How dare you, Brother?" said Maika after a moment of hesitation. "After all that talk of not wanting to sacrifice me, what gives you the right to turn about and sacrifice yourself? Do you not see your own hypocrisy?"

"If I'm a hypocrite, then what does that make you? You're the one who kept going on about how we should always make the most logical decisions we can, aren't you?"

"Grr... Must you quibble so ...?"

"Never thought I'd hear the day you accused *me* of quibbling," Rikuya retorted. Maika had far more of a way with words than he did, so it was quite rare for him to find himself on the winning end of an argument. "Look, I'm not saying that sacrificing myself is the right thing for me to do. I'm saying it's what I want to do, so I'm doing it. That's all there is to it."

"You can't be serious," Maika replied. "That's a terrible reason to do something so drastic!"

"That's life. When it comes down to it, most drastic choices are driven by emotion, not logic."

Maika fell silent. She understood now how firm Rikuya's convictions were, and knew that trying to change his mind was a lost cause. Rikuya paused for a moment as well, then spoke on.

"Maika, Takao—the two of you have what it takes to cover for the other's weaknesses. You make a good team, and you'll do just fine, even without me. You could even reclaim the throne, no trouble. I mean, okay, I can't imagine Takao being the king if I'm being honest, but you could easily be the first queen in Yoh's history, Maika—don't you think? You're the sort of person who can pull off feats that nobody else could manage, so I'm sure you could find a way."

"No more of this talk. I have no intention to listen to your dying wishes," muttered Maika.

With that, Rikuya explained the details of his plan to Takao as well, then

settled in to wait for the moment he'd put it into action.

A few hours passed by, over the course of which Rikuya and his siblings kept a diligent watch over the guards posted outside of their cell. Two guards were kept by the cell the majority of the time, but on rare occasions, there were brief periods where only a single guard stood watch. The Fujimiyas were watching and waiting for one of those moments to come about.

"Shift's up," a guard declared as he arrived at the cell.

"'Kay," one of the two current guards replied.

"Hope we sell 'em soon and can be done with this," the other grumbled.

The time had arrived—after the shift changed, only one guard was left outside the cell. Rikuya signaled Maika with a glance, and for a moment, Maika seemed to hesitate, wondering if she could truly go through with their plan. She quickly resigned herself, however, and shouted the words that set everything into motion.

"I'm through with you, Brother! I've had enough! Taste my fists, you miserable fool!" Maika shouted, at the same time launching herself toward Rikuya, fists flailing. She was trying her best to punch him, though given how weak she was, he hardly even felt the impacts. Maika soon found herself in more discomfort than Rikuya, in fact—all those punches tired her out in no time, and tears soon pooled in her eyes as the pain started to build.

"How dare you call your own brother a miserable fool! You're *dead*!" Rikuya shouted back, then leaped upon Maika with a terrifying ferocity.

The guard, who hadn't been expecting his prisoners to go after each other's throats, started to panic. From the burglars' perspective, Maika was valuable

merchandise, and any injuries she sustained would reduce that value drastically—or eliminate it altogether, if worse came to worst and she died. The guard couldn't afford to let their fight play out unimpeded.

"Hey, you two! Cut that out!" the guard shouted. He wavered for a moment, then pulled out the cell's key, opened the door, and stepped inside.

That was the moment Takao had been waiting for. He stepped behind the guard and headbutted him directly in the back of his skull. Takao's forehead impacted with the force of a large, hefty stone, and the guard dropped to the floor in a heap. Assuming that Takao was harmless since his hands were bound had proven to be a fatal error on his captors' part.

"Well...that worked out," said Rikuya.

"Because he was a fool. Luck was on our side—now let's hope it lasts," Maika retorted.

Rikuya had to agree. No matter how scared the guard was that Maika could be killed, opening the cell *that* easily was a sign that he was not the smartest man they could've chosen to keep watch. Rikuya relieved the guard of his sword and sliced the ropes that had bound Takao's hands. Rikuya and Maika, incidentally, hadn't been restrained at all. Apparently, the burglars hadn't thought much of their ability to put up a fight.

"All right," said Rikuya. "Here's where the real challenge starts."

They'd managed to escape from their cell, and the next step of the plan was for Rikuya to act as a decoy, drawing the burglars' attention while Takao and Maika fled their hideout. Fighting their way out would have been a lost cause—Takao was mighty, but there were too many enemies for him to deal with all of them. If Rikuya could capture the attention of the bulk of their forces,

however, then few enough burglars would be left to try to stop Takao and Maika that they would theoretically be able to break through and make it outside.

Rikuya, on the other hand, would be left to face off against the entire enemy force at once. His death would be all but guaranteed, and in the event that the enemy didn't fall for his diversion or defeated him quicker than planned, all three of the Fujimiya siblings could wind up dead. Unfortunately, there was just no way to guarantee their escape, considering the situation they were in, and Rikuya had proposed the plan knowing the risks it entailed.

"Do you remember how to get to the exit from here?" asked Rikuya.

"Of course. My memory would never fail me," replied Maika.

"Good. In that case, I'll head out first. Wait until you think I have their attention, then get moving," Rikuya said before stepping out of the cell, the guard's sword in hand.

Maika and Takao would bide their time until Rikuya's diversion was in full swing, then slip out using the chaos as cover. It wasn't the most elaborate plan, and there were plenty of ways in which it could fail. All it would take was for Maika to misjudge the moment to make her move and the whole attempt would amount to nothing, but her only choice was to make the most of the opportunity while it lasted.

"Brother..." Maika muttered, her voice quiet and feeble. She sounded like she might break down in tears at any moment, and Rikuya heard her, but he didn't so much as turn around. Now that they had taken out the cell's guard, there was no turning back. The plan was already in motion, and from here on, it was do or die.

Rikuya stepped out of the hideout's jail. The whole hideout was located underground, and the jail in particular was two floors deep. That floor was mostly occupied by storage rooms and the like, while the floor above served as the burglars' living space. Rikuya had been brought through the basement's first floor on the way to his cell, so he more or less remembered the base's layout, and knowing Maika's memory she would have an even more detailed understanding of the structure than he did.

A staircase led from the basement's first floor to the surface. There would be burglars in the above-ground section of the house as well, and there was little hope of Rikuya luring them into his distraction, but thankfully, only a skeleton crew had been present when they passed through the house. Takao would be able to wipe up numbers like those on his own without difficulty.

To start, Rikuya headed for the staircase to the basement's first floor. He didn't even make it all the way there before he ran into one of the burglars, however. The two men noticed each other at the same instant, and the burglar's eyes widened for just a moment as he put two and two together. Soon, his befuddled expression shifted into one of alarm, and he shouted "We've got a jailbreak!" at the top of his lungs.

From Rikuya's perspective, the alarm being raised worked out just fine. His whole goal was to provide a diversion, after all. That being said, if he couldn't get to the first floor in time the whole plan would go up in smoke, so he stepped forward and drew his sword across the burglar's throat in a flash. The man let out a sputtering gargle as he collapsed, blood spewing from the gash in his neck, and Rikuya dashed past him at top speed, making his way up the stairs.

A number of burglars who had been near the staircase came running, drawn

by the noise, but Rikuya cut each of them down in a single stroke and made it up to the basement's first floor. He emerged into a vast chamber, where a crowd of burglars lay in wait for him—apparently, they had decided that fighting in a narrow stairwell would put them at a disadvantage. They did their best to surround Rikuya, but his appearance had been so sudden that they didn't quite have the numbers to box him in. A gap on the left side of their formation gave Rikuya the opportunity he needed, and he was swift enough to take advantage of it and slip free.

"Don't let him get away!" roared one of the burglars behind Rikuya. He glanced over his shoulder to find the whole crowd that had tried to surround him closing in on him en masse. They didn't have the presence of mind to realize that Takao and Maika were nowhere to be found, so Rikuya smirked as the knowledge his plan was working sank in.

He wasn't out of the woods yet, though. More burglars arrived in front of him, blocking his path on two fronts. Thankfully, there was a room just to his right that he could slip into. Rikuya fled through the door, and the burglars swarmed after him—more than ten of them, as best as he could tell. He didn't know how many members their band had, but his best estimate was somewhere around twenty. In other words, he'd captured the majority of their attention.

This is going better than I expected, Rikuya thought to himself. He was almost certainly about to be killed, yet he felt a slight sense of relief. He wouldn't be able to witness Takao and Maika's escape, but with this many of their captors distracted, he knew it wouldn't be difficult for them to slip away.

"Well, you're cornered now, that's for sure. What possessed you to pull a stupid stunt like this?" asked the burglars' boss. Rikuya hadn't realized it in the chaos, but it seemed he'd been one of the people pursuing him. A moment

later, the boss raised an eyebrow. "Hm...? Where're the other two?"

"Who knows?" replied Rikuya.

The boss paused, then turned to his subordinates.

"All right, boys—find the other two, and—"

Rikuya knew what was about to happen. The boss had figured out his plan, and was about to send his men to find Rikuya's siblings, which was an outcome he had to prevent at all costs. He threw himself at the boss, cutting him off before he could finish his command.

The boss clicked his tongue with irritation at Rikuya's assault. He was, unsurprisingly, a cut above his flunkies, and parried Rikuya's attack with ease in spite of Rikuya having the element of surprise. As his sword locked with Rikuya's, he shouted "Find the other two! This one's a distraction!" to the rest of his men.

"Allow us to spare you the trouble of searching!" a woman's voice rang out, as if in response to the boss's order.

"Aaaugh!"

"Wh-What the hell?!"

"Gaaah!"

A trio of screams followed immediately afterward. Rikuya had no idea what had just happened, so he took a moment to reassess the situation. It didn't take long for him to find his explanation: he spotted Takao at the back of the group of burglars, laying into them with his fists, and Maika behind him, doling out orders.

"Wh-What are you doing?!" Rikuya shouted.

"A force caught unawares is a force doomed to defeat!" Maika shouted back.

"With their attention focused upon you, I decided this was our perfect chance to strike!"

"Y-You idiot! That wasn't the plan!"

"You're the only idiot here, Brother! When has one of your plans ever been better than mine?! Now, Takao—charge! Scatter our foes to the winds!"

Takao was still unarmed, but he was prepared to carry out Maika's orders nonetheless. He punched and kicked at the burglars, each swipe of his massive limbs sending another enemy falling to the floor. The onslaught was so sudden and ferocious that the burglars began to descend into a state of panic, and a surge of hope shot through Rikuya as he watched their formation begin to crumble.

Maybe, he thought, this might just actually work!

"Tch... It's just never as easy as it should be," the bandit boss grunted. He was keeping his cool, in contrast to his men-being made of stronger stuff was probably what had made him the leader in the first place.

Rikuya, on the other hand, realized that if he could bring the bandit boss down, the rest of them would surely be routed.

"Graaahhhhhh!" he roared as he pressed the attack.

"Ugh!" the bandit boss grunted. Rikuya was pouring every bit of strength he had into his onslaught, but it wasn't working out as he'd hoped. The bandit boss shifted to a defensive fighting style, barely managing to intercept Rikuya's sword at the last second.

"Calm down, people! Don't panic! We have them outnumbered—go at them all at once, and we can win this!" he shouted, even as he warded off Rikuya's

assault.

The bandit boss's words were exactly what his men had needed. They regained their composure, facing Takao as a united front and coordinating their attack in an attempt to bring him down. Takao, however, was far faster than an ordinary man, and continued dodging their attacks while slipping in the occasional punch, each of which brought down another burglar.

"Heh!" Rikuya chuckled. "Thought you could beat Takao if you just kept your cool, huh? Feeding him was a big mistake. When his stomach's full, Takao can fight at a hundred twenty percent of his usual power!"

Rikuya was more confident than ever that he and his siblings would win the day...but that confidence wouldn't last. No sooner had the thought crossed his mind than he noticed one of the burglars bearing down on Maika out of the corner of his eye. The man held a mace, and was charging at full tilt toward her, ready to crush her skull with a single swing. Maika, meanwhile, hadn't even noticed that the burglar was there.

Rikuya acted in a flash. He abandoned his duel with the burglars' boss, focusing all his attention upon saving his sister. He sprinted toward her, making it to Maika's side just in time to leap between her and the burglar...and in doing so, took the blow himself. The mace impacted heavily into Rikuya's head.

"B-Brother...?" Maika muttered in stunned disbelief.

The blow had been a heavy one. The shock was severe, and agonizing pain raced through Rikuya's skull.

"Brotherrr!"

Rikuya's sense of balance abandoned him, and Maika's terrified wail echoed in his ears as he collapsed to the ground. He felt a pulsing sensation where the mace had impacted, and knew from the lukewarm wetness spreading across his cheek that he was bleeding profusely.

I guess this is it, Rikuya thought as his consciousness began to fade. Memories of his past flashed through his mind, fading away into the darkness that consumed him. Moments before Rikuya slipped away into that darkness himself, one last shout rang out.

"In the name of House Louvent, I, Rietz Muses, order all of you to freeze!"

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"Judging by the noise-erasing magical tool we seized from their base and the variety of stolen goods we recovered, I can say beyond a shadow of a doubt that the individuals who abducted the Fujimiya siblings are indeed the thieves we've been tracking for some time now," reported Rietz.

"Good to know," I said with a nod.

To make a long story short, we had come to the conclusion that the Wyrmsbane Blade had been stolen rather than sold. With that tidbit of extra information to guide them, Rietz and his men had managed to track down the burglars' hideout and rounded the whole gang up in a single raid. All of the members we'd found in the hideout were locked up in Castle Canarre's prison.

It seemed that these bandits were the sort who took quite a lot of care selling their stolen goods, on the whole, but Rikuya's sword had been an exception. Since he was a foreigner, they had assumed that the odds of his belongings being identified as stolen goods were low, and they'd been unusually casual about fencing the sword as a result. Lobke, the man who had sold it to Thoenes,

had initially insisted that he hadn't known it was contraband either, but it hadn't taken long for him to cave under the pressure and admit that he knew the whole time.

Lobke had been well aware of the dangers of dealing in stolen goods, but his business had been on the downswing and the sword's tremendously low price had been too much of a temptation for him to resist. His poor decision proved helpful for us, in the long run—he had given us a description of the man who had sold him the sword, which we'd been able to use to follow his trail through the city, eventually tracking him back to the bandits' hideout without much difficulty at all. The base was already in a state of moderate chaos when Rietz and his men arrived, thanks to the Fujimiyas' well-timed escape attempt, and the burglars had found themselves incapable of resisting Rietz's force. They'd been subdued and arrested in no time flat.



Maika and Takao made it out of the fiasco without any major injuries to speak of. Rikuya, however, was a different story. He'd been brained by a burglar's mace, and the injury the blow had left him with was a serious one. He was still unconscious and in critical condition, it seemed. He hadn't received lethal levels of brain damage, at least—the blood loss, apparently, was the most dangerous factor.

This world's level of medical expertise wasn't very high on the whole, and while healing magic was a thing, the aqua magia needed to cast it was monopolized by Paradille and we didn't have any access to it whatsoever. Blood transfusion technology, meanwhile, hadn't been developed yet, so that was off the table as well. According to the doctor who we'd had look at him, whether or not Rikuya would recover was a question of whether his vitality was up to snuff.

"I wonder if Rikuya's going to pull through...?" I muttered.

"It's hard to say. I'm afraid there's little I can do to help, as far as medical matters are concerned. He seemed like a young and healthy man, at the very least, so with any luck..." Rietz said, trailing off before reaching a clear conclusion.

At that point in our conversation, Maika and Takao arrived to join us. The moment Maika saw me, she rushed over and practically shouted, "Please... I'm begging you! Save my brother!"

Her eyes were bloodshot, and their lids swollen. Clearly, she'd spent quite some time in tears.

"We'll do everything we can. I'm sure he'll make it...or at least, I hope so," I said, shifting to a less certain tone at the last moment. Considering how dicey the situation looked, it would have felt irresponsible to make too definite of a

promise.

"Please... Don't let him die... I'm begging you, please...save him..." Maika implored over and over again. She was trembling violently, and her tears once again streamed down her cheeks. She'd struck me as a strong-willed and unflappable woman when we'd first met, but her attitude now could hardly have been further from that impression. This, I imagined, was her true self.

"It's all right. Our brother would never die," said Takao. In sharp contrast to Maika, he didn't seem shaken in the slightest. I could tell that he had absolute faith that Rikuya would pull through, come what may. His steadfast calm seemed to get through to Maika, at least a little, pulling her out from the depression she'd sunk into.

A few anxious hours passed by, and finally, a report arrived.

"Rikuya has regained consciousness!"

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"Where am I...?" Rikuya muttered, glancing around at his surroundings.

Rikuya had awoken in a soft, comfortable bed, gazing up at a white ceiling. He tried to sit up, but instead flinched and let out a yelp of pain as a sharp, piercing jolt of agony shot through his head.

The noise drew the attention of a woman wearing a maid's uniform, who came running over in a fluster.

"He's awake! The patient's awake!" the maid bellowed excitedly.

"Oh-it's true! I'll report to Lord Ars at once!" a second voice rang out in

response, this one sounding like it belonged to a middle-aged man.

Where is this place...? And who are these people...? Wasn't I fighting those burglars just a moment ago? thought Rikuya. His mind had yet to catch up with the situation he'd found himself in. And wait—did that man say Ars just now?

An image of the young count he'd met just days before drifted through Rikuya's mind. He tried to recall more and figure out what had brought him to this place, but before his effort bore fruit, a middle-aged man wearing a white robe sat down in front of him and began closely observing him.

"Can you tell me how many fingers I'm holding up?" the man asked as he extended two fingers in the air.

"Two," replied Rikuya.

"How about now?" continued the man, adding in a second hand and raising six fingers in total.

"Six... What's the point of all this?"

"Good, good. No abnormalities, then," said the man, ignoring Rikuya's question—much to his frustration.

"Wait, where are Maika and Takao? Um, I mean... Have you seen a small girl and a huge man somewhere around here?"

"Oh, those two? They'll be here any minute now, I'd imagine."

"Any minute now?"

Before Rikuya had the time to question the man's words, the room's door flew open.

"Brother!"

Maika burst into the room, tears streaming down her face as she charged

over to Rikuya and threw her arms around him.

"Brother, you fool! You utter imbecile! You would've died if Sir Rietz had arrived even a moment later! Can you imagine how I would have felt if you'd gotten killed protecting me?!" Maika wailed as she pounded her fists into Rikuya's chest.

Maika's words—the way she'd said that he protected her—finally jogged Rikuya's memory and reminded him of how he'd been hurt. The fact that Ars and Rietz had also stepped into the room, meanwhile, told him that his life had been saved, if only just barely.

I guess that means this must be Castle Canarre...and that I owe these people my life, Rikuya thought with a slight sigh. He looked back at his sister, who was still embracing him. He couldn't see her face, but the occasional faint shudder made it clear that she was still sobbing her eyes out, and it pained Rikuya's heart to know that he'd made her worry about him.

"Sorry," Rikuya whispered as he returned Maika's hug and gently stroked her hair.

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A few weeks had passed since Rikuya regained consciousness. We kept him in the castle's sickroom for some time to make sure he got enough rest to recover, but he had proven surprisingly resilient, and his wound had healed at a remarkable pace. He was back on his feet again far quicker than I'd anticipated.

As a side note, I had of course decided to return the Wyrmsbane Blade to Rikuya. Lobke had been forced to give Thoenes his money back, and was banned from doing business in Canarre ever again as punishment for the crime of dealing in stolen goods. In any case, now that Rikuya had recovered, it seemed like the right time to give his sword back, and so I went out to do just that.

"The Wyrmsbane Blade...?" Rikuya said with an air of shock as I presented the sword to him. "You got it back for me?"

"That's one way of looking at it, but from my perspective, this sword is what led us to the burglars' hideout," I said, offering it to him. Rikuya, however, didn't accept the blade. "What's wrong? It's yours again, so go ahead and take it."

"I'm afraid I can't," said Rikuya with a shake of his head.

Huh? But wait, why? I couldn't make any sense of Rikuya's intentions, and was left in a state of bafflement.

"How could I possibly let you return the Wyrmsbane Blade to me after everything that's happened?" said Rikuya. "I already owe you my life. I can't allow myself to become any more indebted to you than I already am."

"I'm not trying to put you in my debt," I said. "And besides, the people who stole it and imprisoned you were criminals working in Canarre—the territory that House Louvent rules! I have an obligation to protect my people from criminals like them, so if anything, I owe *you* an apology for allowing you to be hurt."

"What? No, stop that! Do you realize how disgraceful it is to be apologized to by the person who just saved my life?! I owe House Louvent a great debt—that's the truth, and you won't be able to convince me otherwise!" Rikuya insisted. He then pushed the Wyrmsbane Blade away from him as if to demonstrate that he had no intention of reconsidering.

I, on the other hand, knew how much of a problem not getting the sword back would be for Rikuya and his siblings. I paused for a moment to think about how I could convince him to take it, but in the end, Rikuya spoke first.

"I know I have no right to ask this after turning you down so many times, but would you consider allowing us to serve you as retainers of House Louvent?" asked Rikuya. "If you'll have me, I swear I will serve you to my fullest ability and repay you for what you've done for me. Please."

"Well, I certainly don't have any problem with taking you into my service...but are you sure about this? You're royalty, aren't you?" I replied.

"Well, sure, but I guess you could say I've realized that some things are more important to me than being king. I appreciate that I'm asking a lot from you, but still—I hope you'll take us in," said Rikuya with a deep bow. He'd gone from swearing to never serve me to begging me to take him—quite the remarkable change of heart, all around.

"C-Consider that a request from me as well!" shouted Maika, who had just been listening to the exchange up to that point. "I may not seem impressive, but you'll find that I have quite the sharp mind! Takao is exactly as capable of a warrior as he looks. As for our brother...well, he doesn't have any stand-out talents, but he also has no glaring defects and will be able to handle any task you set him to with a modicum of competence! You'll find him more useful than you'd think, I promise!"

"Hey! Were you even trying to make me sound good?!" Rikuya shouted indignantly.

Fortunately for him, I didn't need to be convinced that the three of them would be useful. I already knew that very well, and although they'd turned me down twice before, I didn't hold a grudge over it.

"If the three of you are willing to serve me, then I would be most pleased to have you. I'm sure we'll do great things together," I agreed without hesitation.

"Thank you... Thank you so much! I swear to you that you will not regret this!" Rikuya said, bowing down once more.

"You've made a wise decision indeed by taking me into your service, Master," said Maika.

"I-I'm sorry, 'master'?" I repeated. I'd only just made her my retainer a second ago, and she'd already taken to calling me by an inexplicable title.

"Being a retainer means I'll get to eat lots of good food, right? I'm okay with that," said Takao, to nobody's surprise.

"The fact that we're bound to serve another lord is no reason for you to give up on your dreams of kingship, Brother," said Maika. "We need only strive to raise our master to the pinnacle of power! Once we've made him Emperor of Summerforth, we can have him grant us this land of Missian as a reward, and with the Missian army at our beck and call, we can storm the shores of Yoh and reclaim your just title!"

"E-Emperor?!" I stammered, aghast at what I was hearing. I had no plans or interest in climbing that far up the social ladder! My chief concern was surviving through an era of bloody civil warfare, not coming out on top of it!

"You realize that would make us nothing more than invaders, don't you?" said Rikuya.

"Hmph! If they didn't want an invasion on their hands, then they should never have driven us into exile," said Maika. "In any case, the more I think about it the more I realize that this is far and away our most realistic option. With the unique power our master wields at his side, rising to the status of emperor is a

most achievable goal."

"H-Hey, stop that!" I said, jumping into the exchange. "You can't go around talking like that, seriously! I'm not planning on becoming emperor! I just want to live in peace and quiet!"

"Ambitions so meager will never amount to anything, Master," said Maika. "And more to the point, these turbulent times will not come to a close until a new emperor is chosen! Claiming the title for yourself is the quickest way to gain the peace you desire!"

"That sounds great, except for the constant warfare I'd have to go through between now and then! And anyway, I'm not cut out to be an emperor—" I began, only to be interrupted by an unexpected voice.

"I'm in favor of this plan. Lord Ars is indeed a man most suited to the emperor's throne," said Rietz, jumping into the conversation out of nowhere. I hadn't even realized that he'd been listening. "Only a man such as he—a man who does not judge his followers by race or by sex, and who treats his people with fairness and impartiality—has the right to rule over this land."

"Look, I'm *telling* you...ugh, fine. I'll admit that moving up a little further in the world will make things easier for us, but trying to become the emperor's going way too far! Sorry, but that's one expectation I can't live up to!" I said, closing the book on that conversation. I then made a mental note to keep a tight rein on my followers' expectations in the future.

And so Rikuya, Maika, and Takao became my three newest retainers.



Over the course of just a few months, I had recruited a whole host of capable retainers, including Virge, Enan, Rikuya, Maika, and Takao. That wasn't even the whole of my accomplishments—I had also managed to bring Thomas into the fold, albeit on a trial basis, and contracted the Bangle Mercenaries to fight for me. Braham had grown massively as well, getting over a number of the bad habits borne of his inexperience. I had brought in new people left and right, and those who were already working for me were developing in the right direction.

Having more people on my side was a good thing, of course, but I was well aware that the larger our roster of personnel became, the more likely my retainers were to start developing interpersonal conflicts. As such, I decided to hold a celebratory banquet in the hopes of deepening the bonds between all of my allies. The banquet would be held in Castle Canarre, and since only my closest allies would be attending I decided to forgo putting on any shows or performances and instead simply treat everyone to a lavish feast. That, I figured, would leave everyone satisfied.

Time sped by, and before I knew it, the day of the banquet arrived. My retainers all gathered up in a room in the castle, dressed in their finest clothing.

"I would like to thank all of you for gathering here today," Rietz said, addressing the crowd. "Thanks to an economic upturn and the abundance of this year's harvests, along with the steady development of excavation sites that have increased our magistone output, I believe it's safe to say that Canarre is on the rise in more ways than one. Furthermore, I believe that all of you, the

count's personal retainers, deserve a fair share of the credit for our success."

Honestly, I thought Rietz's speech was a little stiff. I wouldn't have minded if he'd been more casual, or at least talked about less dry topics. Charlotte had decided that this was going to take a while, and let out a not quite subtle yawn.

"Let us all continue to work together to raise House Louvent to even greater heights, and let us provide a warm welcome to those among us who are newer to the fold! Today, we celebrate!" Rietz finally concluded, leading everyone in a toast. I joined in as well, though since I wasn't old enough to drink yet I settled for a cup of juice instead of alcohol.

"I really am impressed. House Louvent has gained so many new followers, and you perceived the talents of every last one of them!" Licia, who was standing beside me and sipping her own glass of juice, said admiringly. "I don't believe I've met quite a number of them, in fact... Are those three from a foreign country?"

It seemed Rikuya and his siblings had caught her attention. "Yes, actually—they're from a country called Yoh," I explained. "They're siblings, believe it or not, and their names are Rikuya, Maika, and Takao Fujimiya. They're my newest retainers. I'd actually forgotten that I had yet to introduce you to them."

"This is my first time seeing them, yes! They're siblings? Truly?" said Licia, giving the trio a somewhat skeptical glance.

"Why, good evening to you!" said Virge, stepping up to me and Licia. "I must say, Lord Ars, you're looking positively dashing tonight, and your lady bride is as lovely as could be! And truly, what a wonderful party you've thrown for us—we're ever so obliged! To think that our numbers have grown so much! What a pleasure it is to make so many new friends and compatriots, and what a

wonderful day today is shaping up to be!"

Licia and I returned Virge's long-winded greeting, only for him to say, "Oh, but look at the time—I must make the rounds and say a word to all the others! Tah tah!" and wander into the crowd before we'd even had the chance to have a proper conversation with him. He made his way over to Mireille first, then Rosell, then the Fujimiya siblings and Charlotte in turn, spending just a brief moment in conversation with each. He was a restless man, to say the least. I had to wonder if he just didn't feel at ease unless he was talking with someone.

"Wh-Why are there this many people here...? Oh, no, no no no no ... I think I'll just go home..."

"Are ya stupid, or something?! You're just gonna leave when we've got a golden opportunity to chow down for free?! And anyway, it's high time you figured out how to hold a damn conversation! If this isn't the right time to practice talkin' to people then when is?!"

"N-Not now, that's for sure! As far as I'm concerned it's a miracle that I can even talk to you, Shin! How am I supposed to talk to anyone when I'm surrounded by strangers...?"

I overheard bits and pieces of a conversation between Shin and Enan, who happened to be nearby. The two of them weren't technically my retainers in the same way everyone else was—they'd never sworn loyalty to me, or anything—but I'd invited them to the banquet anyway. I'd expected Shin to attend and Enan to turn the offer down, but apparently Shin had decided to bring her along with him by force, much to her displeasure.

"Oh, hey, it's Lord Ars and his wife," Shin piped up as he noticed us. "Thanks for calling us up to the castle for this!"

"I just hope you enjoy yourselves," I replied.

"You know I will! You really went all-out on the grub, and I'm gonna stuff my face with it! Oh, and while we're at it, turns out Enan's a pretty useful gal after all. Think we might have some good news coming your way before you know it... And oh, man, does that meat over there ever look good!" said Shin, who proceeded to wander off toward the dish that had caught his eye.

"When he said to expect good news, do you suppose he was talking about the airship?" asked Licia.

"Most likely, I figure," I replied. "Maybe they're almost finished with it! You never know."

"Oh, that's so exciting! Let's ride it together when it's finished!" said Licia, her eyes sparkling with glee.

When she put it that way, taking an airship trip together didn't sound bad at all...except for the part where flying vessels were inherently dangerous in all sorts of ways, of course. Even after Shin got his ships off the ground, I had a feeling it could take some time before they were ready to start taking on passengers. We'd have to wait.

"Oh, there he is! Evening, Lord Ars!" said Braham, who wound up being the next to approach us. Judging by the plates full of meat he held in each hand, he was already enjoying the banquet to the fullest. "This stuff's seriously tasty, y'know?! Want some?"

I accepted Braham's enthusiastic offer, and sampled some of the meat as well. He was right—it was delicious.

"Y'know that Takao guy who showed up the other day? He's crazy tough!" Braham said as I chewed. "I sparred him one-on-one a little while back, and it just might've been the closest fight I've ever been in! And he doesn't seem to know his way around a weapon yet, so with a little training, I think he's gonna get even more crazy-dangerous! Can I have him in my unit? Please?!"

It seemed that Braham had challenged Takao to a duel before I even knew they'd become acquainted. He made it sound like he'd won, though not necessarily by a large margin.

"Sorry, but Takao's off the table. I'll be having him, Rikuya, and Maika all working together," I replied. My intention was to found a new unit for the Fujimiya siblings to take collective command of. They'd only just joined forces with me, though, so I was still a ways off from putting that plan into action.

"Oooh, right. Yeah, makes sense, since they're related and all," said Braham, giving up with remarkable ease.

"I'm told that your unit has been doing incredible work lately! That's very impressive," Licia chimed in.

Braham blushed brightly.

"I-Impressive? No way, I'm still just getting started," he said. It was very clear to me that the compliment had gone straight to his head, but at the very least he'd learned to act like he was being modest about it. Just a little while ago he would've been singing his own praises before I knew it, so I considered this progress, in its own sort of way.

"Get off of me, you miserable woman!"

"Hey! Is that any way to talk to your big sister, huh?!"

"What are you-Stop that... Ah! Hey, kid! Help me out over here!"

Thomas shouted to me next, walking in my direction and dragging Mireille—who was clinging stubbornly to him—along with.

"H-Hello, Mister Thomas and Miss Mireille!" said Braham, who had stiffened up the second he saw the two of them.

"What are you doing this time, Mireille?" I sighed.

"Isn't it obvious? She's being an obnoxious drunkard," said Thomas with a scowl. "You're the count, so you're the only one with the authority to have her thrown out of the castle, and it's high time you used it."

"I think throwing her out would be a little too harsh," I said, then turned to his sister. "H-Hey, Mireille, you're making Thomas uncomfortable! You should cut it out."

"Huh? Oh, hey, it's you, kiddo! You wanna hug too?"

"That is not what I said!" I shouted in protest.

Please, you can't make jokes like that in public! I thought as I glanced over at Licia. She was smiling, technically, but since we'd gotten married I'd learned to pick out the little nuances of her expressions, and I knew for a fact that this was one of the smiles that meant her mood was about to take a severe turn for the worse.

"Ha ha ha! Oh, I'm just kidding! Lady Licia'd have my hide if I tried anything, and I damn well know it," said Mireille. "Huh? Hey, look, it's Braham!"

"Hello, Miss Mireille," Braham repeated enthusiastically.

"Looks to me like you've gone and grown on us again, huh? You used to be just another plain 'ol idiot, but now you're more like the nice li'l boy next door, or something! Still look dumb as a post, though."

"Thank you! I still have a lot of work to do, but I'll be giving it my all to better myself!" replied Braham.

"G-Great," said Mireille. She seemed a little taken aback to see Braham reply so positively to her backhanded encouragement. "Hmm. Y'know, you always seemed like such a moron I couldn't see you any other way, but now that you've cleared that up a bit, you've got a pretty cute sorta babyface thing going... Huh? Are you...totally my type?" Mireille added, catching the rest of us as off guard as she'd been caught just a moment before.

"Wh-What do you mean, your type?" said Braham, a hint of concern creeping into his expression.

"Oh, you *know* what I mean!" said Mireille. "So, Braham, you have anything planned after the banquet's done?"

"Huh?" Braham blinked. "Uh, no, not really. I was just gonna go straight to bed after I finished eating."

"liinteresting! In that case, how about the two of us slip away and—"

"I-I don't really get all that sorta stuff! Bye!" Braham shouted, then fled the scene without wasting a second.

"Ah, nuts. He sure didn't let me down easy," grumbled Mireille.

"You weren't gentle with your approach either, so of course he didn't," I sighed.

"Yeah, true enough. Looks like I'll have to take my time bringing him around," said Mireille, licking her lips as she watched him go.

I could only shake my head. I wasn't interested in shutting down my retainers' love affairs, but I had a feeling that Mireille's in particular could be way more trouble than they were worth, and made a mental note to consider banning her in specific from flirting with any of my other followers. Thankfully, she was drunk enough that if my luck held, she'd have forgotten all about Braham by

the next morning.

"Y'know, if I marry Braham, that'd make you his little brother," Mireille said as she elbowed Thomas.

"Stop saying these awful things, woman!" Thomas bellowed in reply.

"Honestly, though, I had Braham pegged as a tough but useless idiot, and look at him now, all grown up and stuff! Looks like you've brought a buncha new people in lately too, and I bet they're all just as useful, eh? That power of yours sure is working wonders, kiddo," Mireille continued, the look on her face shifting to something much more serious than before. "Keep bringing 'em in at this rate, and keep growing Canarre, and you might just find yourself turning into one of the most powerful counts in Missian! Hell, you might already be one of 'em for all I know," she added with a somewhat satisfied grin. "Then again, there's such a thing as getting too powerful, too quickly. That can draw in all sorts of bad attention, so better keep an eye out!"

I decided to take Mireille's warning to heart. She was right, after all—the stronger that Canarre grew as a county, the more wary of us Seitz would become. For all I knew, even Couran might start seeing me as a threat if I pushed my luck too far. Thankfully, my relationship with him was friendly, for the moment, and I hadn't gotten the sense that he felt any hostility toward me yet. Couran was also a very broad-minded person, so I figured he would see Canarre's growth as a positive development...or at least, I wanted to believe that was the case.

"Good evening to you, Lord Ars...and to your lovely companion, as well," said Rikuya, who picked that moment to approach me with Maika and Takao at his side.

"Good evening, and a pleasure to meet you," said Licia. "I am Ars's wife, Licia

Louvent."

"H-His wife?! You're married?!" Rikuya yelped in shock. I gathered that someone my age getting married was not the norm in Yoh—though of course, when I put it that way we'd tied the knot pretty early by Summerforthian standards as well. My father had apparently waited until his late twenties to get married, after all.

"Hmph-if he's married, then that sinks my plan to wed him myself and tie our families together straight away," grumbled Maika.

"W-Wait, what? Is that really what you were going for?!" asked Rikuya, aghast.

"Just a jest, of course."

"Make it more obvious next time, please!" Rikuya groaned. He always seemed to make a point of calling out Maika's more eccentric behavior. "Oh, I'm sorry, I should have already introduced myself. My name is Rikuya Fujimiya, and I've recently entered House Louvent's service," he continued, turning back to Licia.

"And I am his sister, Maika Fujimiya!"

"I'm Takao Fujimiya...and there's so much good food here, I think this is the happiest day of my entire life," said Takao, finishing off the trio's introductions with a smile so broad, I didn't doubt his claim for a second.

"You always say that whenever there's enough good food on the table to satisfy you," Rikuya said with a shake of his head.

"Hey, kiddo, are those three the new retainers you got the other day?" asked Mireille, who'd still been loitering nearby.

I confirmed her guess, then introduced her to the three of them, pulling Thomas into the exchange while I was at it.

"Yoh... Come to think of it, I'm pretty sure I drank some great booze in Semplar once that was supposed to be an export from Yoh. Yeah, I'm sure of it—it was real good stuff," said Mireille, pausing for a moment to bask in the memory of a drink long passed. "And now that I look at her...isn't that Maika kid totally my type?" she added, a distinct glimmer of interest entering her eyes.

She's hopeless. Thomas was right—I should've driven her out of the castle while I had the chance, for her own sake.

"Your...type? Does that mean you like me?" asked Maika with a cock of her head.

"It sure does," said Mireille with a nod.

"Interesting! I don't know why you've taken a liking to me, but I don't dislike it when people appreciate me!" said Maika with a smile that told me she didn't have the foggiest idea what sort of dubious thoughts were going through Mireille's mind at that very moment.

"O-Oh, gods, she's adorable... I've always wanted to corrupt an innocent little girl like her," Mireille muttered.

Yup. Definitely hopeless.

I resolved to never, ever invite Mireille to an event where alcohol would be served again...though I had a funny feeling that she'd find a way to show up uninvited, regardless.

"Hey, you. I'm gonna have to ask you to stop leering at my sister now," said Rikuya, stepping in to give Mireille a piece of his mind before I had the chance to stop her.

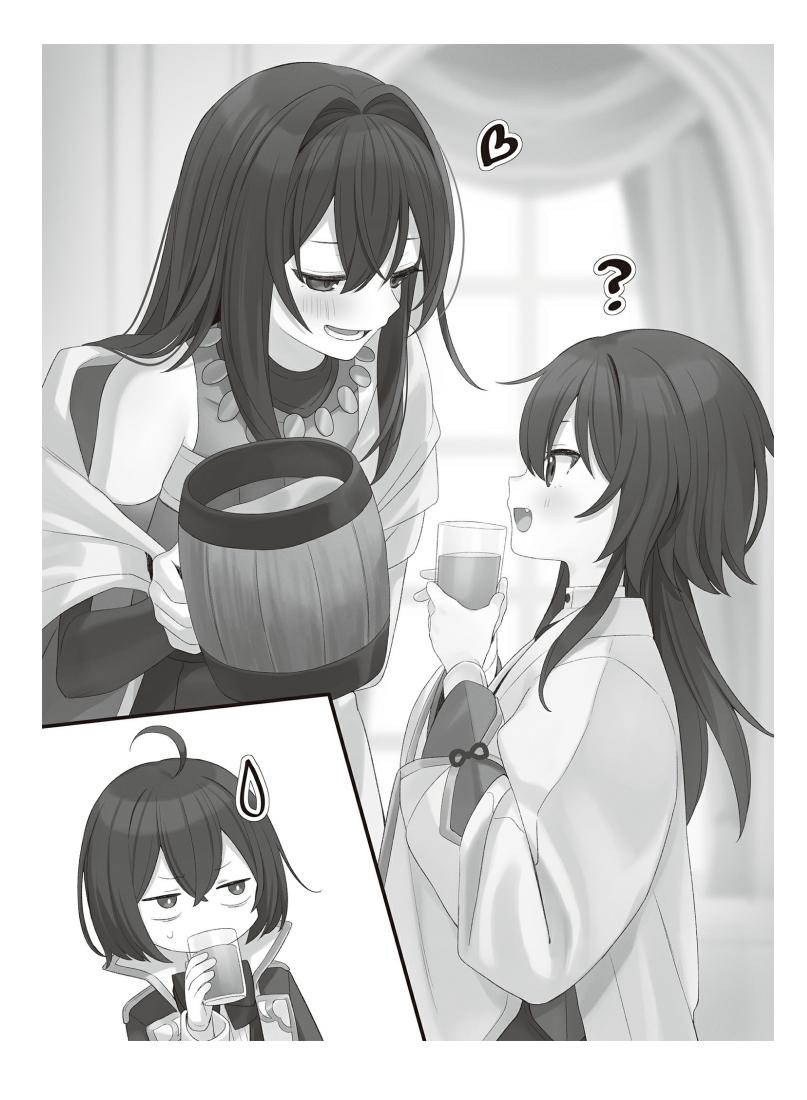
"What?" grunted Mireille. "Look, guy, mediocre men don't interest me. Take a hike, 'kay?"

"Wha—You did *not* just call me mediocre to my face!" shouted Rikuya. Mireille had just happened to pick out his sorest subject, and for a moment I thought the two of them were going to come to blows.

"Hey, Mireille," I interjected in a last-ditch effort to keep things peaceful, "they're opening up a few bottles of some *really* nice alcohol over on the other side of the room! We only have a few, though, so you'd better hurry if you want some!"

"Wh-What?! Gotta go, bye!"

And just like that, Mireille was gone in a flash. My story hadn't been a complete lie, for what it's worth. They really were passing out drinks on the other side of the room—it's just that those drinks weren't anything special, in truth. Considering how drunk Mireille already was, though, I was pretty confident she wouldn't be able to tell the difference.



"You certainly have some...eccentric retainers, don't you?" said Licia.

"I can't deny that," I admitted, "but if I made a list of my most eccentric followers, I think Maika and Takao would end up in the top ranks."

"Y-Yes, I suppose I can see that."

"One moment—Takao, I can accept, but I don't appreciate you treating me like an eccentric as well, Master!" Maika irritably interjected.

"The three of you are from Yoh, I believe? What sort of place is your homeland? I'm afraid I know next to nothing about it," said Licia.

"Hmm—where to start..." said Maika. "It's an island nation, for one thing. Our diets consist largely of fish, and the locals are a rather hot-blooded bunch, on the whole. Civil wars are common, and thanks to the ousting of the royal family, I believe the land is likely controlled by a variety of feuding warlords at the moment. That's just speculation, of course. For all I know, some nobleman somewhere has become the new king and united Yoh under his banner."

"I see... It sounds rather like Summerforth, then, at least when it comes to the civil wars. Our emperor is still alive and well, of course... You said your royal family was defeated? That must have been quite the difficult period for everyone involved."

"Y-Yes, it certainly was," Rikuya awkwardly muttered.

We had decided that there was no need to spread around his family's royal status without reason, so for the time being me, Rietz, and Rosell—who we'd gone to for information on their homeland—were the only ones who knew. I was considering letting Licia in on the secret later on, though.

"Okay, we'd better go introduce ourselves to everyone else," Rikuya said, then led his siblings off to speak with the other guests.

I watched them go, a little worried about how that would work out, but thankfully, their socializing seemed to proceed without any serious issues. They kept their introductions simple and to the point, and it seemed things would work out between them and everyone else just fine, much to my relief.

The rest of the banquet passed by without incident, and eventually, the evening's celebration drew to a close. It had been a roaring success, and it seemed to me that the bonds between my retainers had strengthened. Considering how much I was planning on expanding their numbers in the long term, I had a feeling that we'd be having a lot more of these gatherings in the future.

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"Well done," said Boroths Heigand. He was currently working out of Fort Purledo, located in the Purledo county of Seitz, and had just received a report from a spy he had dispatched to gather information.

After the disastrous invasion of Missian that Boroths had overseen, his standing had fallen so dramatically that he had half expected to be exiled or executed for his failure. The Duke of Seitz, however, had chosen not to punish Boroths in any particular capacity and instead had once again instructed him to seize control of Canarre by any means necessary. Boroths's instructions were clear: to bring Ars Louvent over to Seitz's side, or if that proved impossible, to put an end to him.

On those objectives, Boroths and the duke were very much in agreement. Ever since the failure of his first invasion, Boroths had prioritized building up his forces, sabotaging Canarre's capacity to defend itself, and gathering information about the enemy while he was at it. Canarre, unfortunately, seemed to have a very capable network of spies themselves running counterintelligence, and Boroths's agents hadn't been able to obtain as much information as he'd hoped. Worse still, the brigands-turned-soldiers that Boroths had dismissed from the army and sent into Canarre to wreak havoc had apparently been exterminated before they could cause much damage to speak of.

I see now that he simply has too many capable followers for these plans to work. Half measures won't be enough to win us the day...and we don't have the time to build up a force strong enough to claim Canarre by brute force. I'm running out of options.

One point in Boroths's spies' reports had been consistent: the Count of Canarre had been taking more and more individuals into his service as time wore on. There was no way of judging how capable those newcomers were yet, of course, but Boroths was confident that more and more monstrous talents would be taking to the field on Canarre's side in the near future.

As if the personnel situation wasn't dire enough, Canarre's economy was also going through an upswing. The state of affairs was favorable for Missian on the whole, but Canarre in particular had been implementing one exceedingly rational policy after another. Canarre's officials had proven capable of interfacing with its people, as well, and civilian enterprises had been speeding along at a breakneck pace. It was plain to see that Canarre was developing at a rate that put the other counties of Missian to shame. If that economic boom were to spread to the neighboring counties as well, then they would soon be a threat that Seitz couldn't ignore.

I need to snip this in the bud...and to that end...I suppose an assassination is the only means I have left.

Boroths knew what he had to do, but resolving to assassinate a political figure and carrying that assassination out were two very different matters. None of Boroths's personal retainers had the skills to succeed at such a task, and so he had concluded that his only choice was to hire a third party...but information on capable killers-for-hire wasn't easily obtained, either. Boroths had learned of one master assassin so far, and had sent his men to find them, but as time passed by no report seemed to be forthcoming.

By that point, Boroths was starting to panic.

"Have we still not managed to make contact with Zetsu?" he asked one of his nearby retainers.

"There's still no word, sir," the retainer replied.

"I see... I'm starting to wonder if the information we received was even true in the first place," Boroths said with a shake of his head.

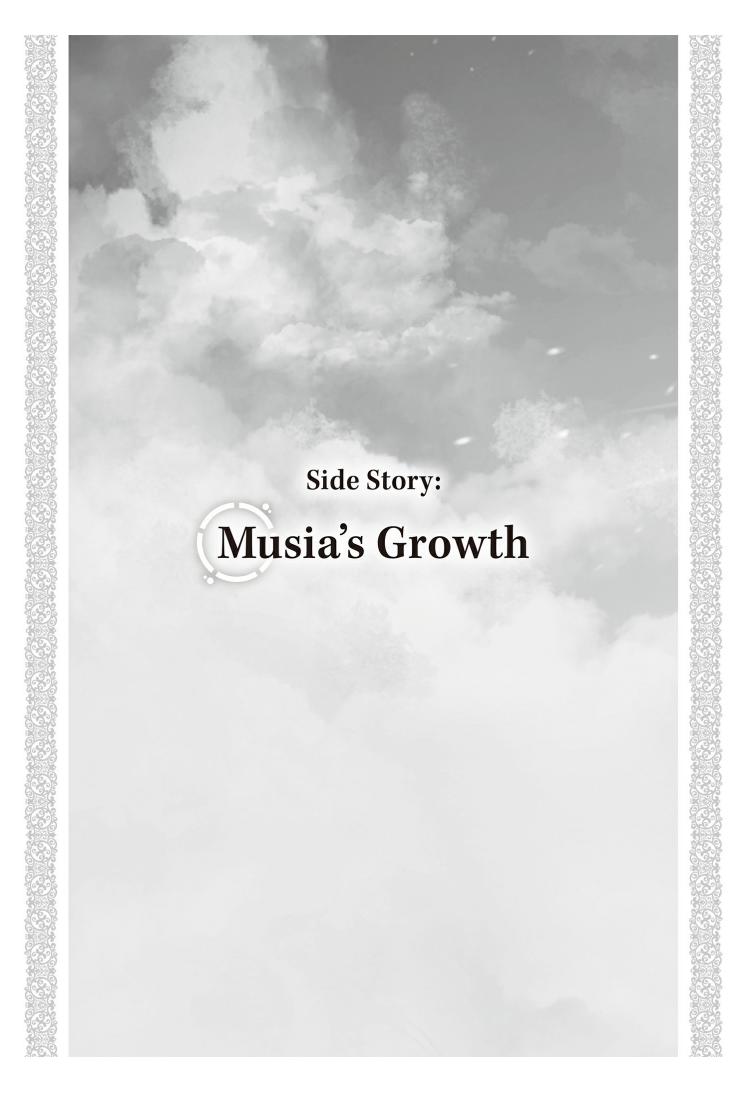
Just then, another of Boroths's men burst into the chamber. "A report's come in, Sir Boroths! We've found Zetsu!"

"You have?! Excellent!" said Boroths, a look of relief coming across his face.

"They've agreed to speak with you, and are waiting in the parlor at this moment."

"The parlor? Understood-I'll leave at once."

Boroths stood up and headed for the parlor. At long last, the assassination of Ars Louvent would be set into motion.



One morning in the magical training grounds near Castle Canarre, Musia was hard at work practicing her spellcraft. It was one of the mage battalion's days off, officially, so Musia was the only mage in the area.

There were many different ways for a mage to practice their magic, from actual, practical spellcasting to training the speed of their incantations. Practical training consumed aqua magia, and while that was by no means prohibited, Musia wasn't the sort of person who could bring herself to request permission to do so during her own private training sessions. She felt bad for consuming resources on her own, and so she prioritized forms of practice that didn't need any expenditures.

"Working pretty hard for a day off, eh?" Charlotte called out as she stepped into the training grounds.

"Ah, Charlotte! Good morning," Musia replied with a polite bow. "What are you doing here? I thought we didn't have any training scheduled today."

"Just out on a walk. I was in the area and figured you might be in here, so I decided to take a peek, and looks like I was right!" said Charlotte. "Practicing your incantations, huh?"

"Yes!" replied Musia.

"You know it'd be better practice if you actually cast the spells, right?"

"W-Well, yes, I know that, but considering how much aqua magia that would use, it just feels wrong to go that far when nobody even asked me to be practicing today..."

"Oh, no worries there. I talked Rietz into getting us a whole supply of aqua magia just for practicing with the other day. Having a stock ready for battle's important and all, but if we wanna be useful when the time for fighting comes, we need to get in as much practice as we can—or that's what I told him, anyway."

"Oh, wow!" said Musia. "You managed to talk Rietz into something this time? That's amazing!"

"Heh heh!" Charlotte chuckled proudly, then paused. "Wait, was that a compliment, or were you making fun of me?"

"Oh... I-It was a compliment, of course! Hurray! Having lots of aqua magia for practice sounds amazing!" shouted Musia, playing up her excitement as best as she could manage. Fortunately for her, Charlotte seemed convinced by the act and grinned as she crossed her arms.

"All right, then—I'll take you up on that and use some right away," Musia continued, then set about preparing to cast a proper spell.

Musia brought out a small catalyzer for her practice. Canarre's mages occasionally practiced spellcasting using medium or large catalyzers as well, but never in this training ground in particular. Medium and large-scale spells were too powerful, and risked blowing the whole place to pieces. As such, those drills were almost always conducted far outside the city limits. The variety of spells that could be cast using a small catalyzer was limited, but one could still get used to the feeling of casting a destructive spell and refine one's aim using the smaller variety easily enough.

Musia faced one of the targets that had been set up for Fire Bullet practice and cast her spell. The resulting ball of flame slammed right into the target, producing a blast far larger than one would expect from a small catalyzer. A typical mage's Fire Bullet would result in a modest explosion, at most. Hitting a person with one would cause some nasty burns, but a single blast wouldn't be enough to finish anyone off. Musia's Fire Bullets, however, produced a very respectable blast. Even a fully-armored warrior would be killed by a direct hit the vast majority of the time. It was a very impressive spell...and yet, Musia didn't seem satisfied. She knew very well, after all, that her spell's potency paled in comparison to the Fire Bullets that Charlotte could cast.

Charlotte's Fire Bullets brought about truly massive explosions, on a scale that most mages could only rival by casting with a mid-sized catalyzer or using explosive-aspected aqua magia. Compared to hers, Musia's spells were nothing special.

Musia went on to cast several more Fire Bullets. The power of her spells had been inconsistent at the beginning of her career as a mage, but recently, she'd managed to reach a degree of stability. These days, her spells were powerful across the board.

"You've grown," Charlotte said quietly. She looked almost moved by Musia's progress.

"I'm still nothing compared to you. I have have to work even harder," Musia replied in a rather serious tone.

"Oh? Trying to catch up to me, are you? Somebody's getting ambitious."

"Huh? Ah, N-No, that's not exactly... I just thought I could try to follow your example and get a little closer to you, that's all..."

"Oh, really? Well, sounds like I'd better get some practice in so you don't blow past me," said Charlotte. Musia's determination, it seemed, had lit a fire in her. "Let me in on this session."

"Ah, o-okay!" said Musia.

The two of them spent the morning practicing their spells together.

"You really are incredible, Charlotte," said Musia, admiring her fellow mage after they had wrapped up their practice session. Musia's magical power had grown as of late, but it was still a far cry from the sort of power that Charlotte wielded.

"Can't deny it," replied Charlotte, who was enjoying the praise. "Anyway, we can't go using any more aqua magia than this for just the two of us, so we'd better head back for today."

"Oh, right! Of course!"

With that, Musia and Charlotte packed up and headed back toward the castle proper.

"Come to think of it, I've heard that some new mages will be joining the unit tomorrow," Musia said, striking up a conversation during the trip back.

"Huh? That so?" asked Charlotte.

"Y-You hadn't heard?"

"Hmm... Actually, now that you mention it, that does sound sorta familiar. Slipped my mind up until now, though."

"You forgot about it...?" said Musia, her expression aghast.

"How many are we getting this time, again?" asked Charlotte.

"Five, and Lord Ars's Appraisal identified all of them as having a talent for magic! I have a feeling that they'll surpass me in no time if I'm not careful, so I'll have to be even more diligent about practicing from now on..."

"Just five, huh? Wish he could get a whole bunch of 'em all at once, one of these days."

"I-I don't think that finding capable mages is quite that easy."

"Yeah, I guess, and a few new people's sure better than nothing. I think I'll have to step in and give everyone a personal lesson in magic tomorrow."

"Th-That sounds great!" Musia replied, though in truth, she was somewhat conflicted about the proposal.

Charlotte, for all her strengths as a mage, was not much of a teacher. Musia herself had struggled to understand Charlotte's directions early on in her career, so she knew that very well. She'd gotten a grasp of Charlotte's unique manner of giving instructions, but she worried that the new mages wouldn't be able to follow their commanding officer's logic.

I guess I'll have to step in and help her, if that's what it comes to...though I'm not sure I'll be able to do any better than she does, Musia thought to herself. For better or for worse, she would do what she could to help the unit's new mages through the early stages of their training.

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The next day, the five new mage recruits gathered up at the magical training grounds to meet the rest of the unit. All five of them were men. Although one's sex made no difference when it came to magical ability, society at large viewed warfare as a man's world, and so the majority of those who responded to Ars's recruitment drives were male in spite of his best efforts to the contrary.

"I'm the leader of Canarre's mages, Charlotte Lace. Good to work with you!"

Charlotte said to the new recruits.

A stir ran through the mages as they heard their commander's name.

"So she's the Charlotte Lace?" said one.

"I heard that back in the war with Seitz, she turned the battlefield into a real hell on earth..." whispered another.

Charlotte's reputation preceded her not just in Canarre, but all throughout Missian. Many of the rumors revolving around her were unsettling, to say the least, and people tended to look upon her with terror more often than with respect.

"Starting today, I'll be teaching you everything you need to know about magic. If you ever have any questions, don't hesitate to speak up," Charlotte continued. The new soldiers let out a collective sigh of relief as they realized that their leader wasn't as scary as they'd anticipated.

Musia and the rest of the unit's mages introduced themselves next, and the new mages followed their example. After that, it was time for their training to begin. The new mages were each given a catalyzer and told how to cast their spells. Musia watched over Charlotte, worrying all the while how her instructions would go over.

None of the new mages had ever cast a spell before. Although magic did have practical applications outside of battle, the majority of magical tools were far too valuable for common folk to ever afford them or even have the chance to use them. All five of the new recruits came from modest backgrounds, and their lifestyles would never have led them into contact with magic if they hadn't been taken into Ars's service. That being said, Ars's power proved its worth once again as they each succeeded casting spells one after the other, producing

remarkably powerful results for their first attempts—though none of them came close to equaling Charlotte's destructive potential, of course.

"Not bad for your first try, but none of you have what it takes to make a difference in battle just yet. 'Course, that's what training's for! You'll get there," Charlotte said after she'd finished observing the new mages' spells.

"What should we do to make our magic more powerful, Ma'am?" asked one of the new recruits.

"More powerful, huh? Hmm," Charlotte began. She spent a moment pondering the question. "Basically, you just pack your spells full of all the takethat-guy-down energy you can work up," she finally answered.

"All the...what?" said the new mage, a look of blank incomprehension on his face.

Musia couldn't take it.

"U-Umm," she said, sliding into the exchange, "essentially, Charlotte is trying to say that if you want to make your magic more powerful, you have to focus on succeeding. The more clearly you can envision the way you want your spell to play out, the more likely it will be to turn out that way!"

"Right, that's the ticket. It's all about visualizing!" said Charlotte with a nod.

"Losing your composure will also cause your magic's power to lessen, so you need to keep a clear head at all times," Musia continued. "It's also a skill that you can build up over time! Your magic is like a muscle—the more you use and train it, the stronger it grows. There are also certain foods that make it easier to raise your magical potential, so the longer you spend training with our unit to be a mage, the more your power will develop!"

The new mages all seemed quite impressed by Musia's explanation—and they

weren't alone.

"Oh, huh! Really?" chimed in Charlotte herself.

'Ch-Charlotte, why are *you* surprised by that?! You should know all of this already!" said Musia.

"Not really? My magic was plenty strong from the start," countered Charlotte.

Musia let out a sigh of exasperation. Her fears had been justified: when it came to magic, Charlotte was simply too much of a genius to be a half-decent teacher.

The training of the new recruits continued, and Charlotte's explanations remained borderline incomprehensible to her pupils. Musia's attempts to clarify those explanations, on the other hand, were exceedingly straightforward and easy to follow, allowing the new mages to get a grasp of the essentials. Thanks to Musia, by the time their first day of practice came to a close they had become capable enough spellcasters that no one would ever have guessed they'd only picked up a catalyzer for the first time earlier that same day.

"You're incredible, Musia-I can actually use magic now! Thank you so much!"

"I'd never cast a single spell before today, so when I heard I was going to be a mage I couldn't stop doubting myself, but I managed it without a problem! This is such a relief, and it's all thanks to you, Musia!"

The fledgling mages Musia had taught thanked her one after another, and she found herself unsure of how to react.

"Oh, um, well... I think today going well has more to do with your talent than my teaching, really... I'm glad to hear that I was at least a little helpful, though," she said with a slight blush.

"Hmm..." Charlotte muttered as she watched the scene play out. "You know, I think you might be a better teacher than I am. Not that I ever wanted to teach anyway, I guess. Okay, that settles it—you're in charge of training the newbies from now on!"

"Huh?" Musia grunted. "W-Wait, I'm in charge of them?! I-I couldn't possibly! That's way too much responsibility!" she protested.

"It'll be filine, trust me! This feels like one of those right person in the right place at the right time sorta deals, or whatever they say!"

"I'm...the right person...?"

"And while we're at it, why don't you give everyone else some pointers too? I know some of our troops are starting to lag behind the rest, so I figure they could use it."

"What? I-I don't know... You mean you want me to train mages who joined the unit before me? I couldn't possibly..."

"Why not? I'm the only one in the unit who knows her stuff better than you, at this point. Actually, I'm pretty sure everyone's dying to know how you got so good so fast."

"A-Are they, really?" asked Musia.

"Yup! They're chomping at the bit to find out, I'm sure of it!" Charlotte insisted. "I'm not forcing you, though. If you're too busy with your own training to deal with 'em, I'll give up on that idea."

Musia paused to consider her options.

Is this really all right? I'm so inexperienced myself...how could I possibly train other mages? she wondered, a sense of unease beginning to grow within her. But then again, it did seem like my advice helped the new recruits improve...and

if this is the one thing I can do to help out the unit as a whole...

Musia wavered for just a moment longer, then made up her mind.

"All right. I'll do it!" she replied.

"Thanks! You start tomorrow, 'kay?" Charlotte said with a grin.



Musia began instructing the rest of the mages in her unit the very next day. Just as Charlotte had predicted, many of their mages-in-arms were excited to learn all the tips and tricks she had to teach them, and that's exactly what she did, in a manner they all found easy to digest. Her friendly attitude made a difference, as well, helping improve the mages' motivation to improve their skills. In no time at all, they were practicing away with a far greater fervor than their usual sessions prompted.

Just two weeks later, Musia's lessons had already borne fruit. The mages of Charlotte's unit had improved their skills dramatically, and Charlotte was more than a little pleased to see it.

"I can't believe how far they've all come in just a couple weeks! I owe you one this time, Musia!" said Charlotte.

"B-But I didn't do much at all! It's thanks to everyone's hard work, not me!" Musia protested, though in spite of her humility she was clearly pleased by her leader's praise.

"Sorry about all this, though," Charlotte continued. "You've been so busy teaching that you haven't had much time to practice yourself, right?"

"It's true, I haven't, but, actually... I think that teaching everyone has helped me improve my own magic, as well," Musia replied.

"Huh? How's that work? You haven't been practicing, have you?"

"Well, no...but I think that teaching them has helped me notice all sorts of little things that I could be doing better, I suppose..."

"Huuuh! That's sure something. Here-try showing me just how much better you've gotten."

"All right!" Musia agreed, then began preparing to cast her spell.

Once again, she set up a small catalyzer and conjured up a Fire Bullet. This time, however, the resulting explosion was remarkably large. She had almost never been able to manifest magical power of that scale before, and yet now, she was able to cast several Fire Bullets in a row, each as destructive as the last. It was plain to see that she had grown since the last time she'd trained with Charlotte.

"Wow. You really *have* gotten better," said Charlotte, her eyes wide with shock. Musia's spell hadn't quite reached the levels of power that Charlotte could put out, but the gap between the two of them had shrunk. Suddenly, Charlotte came to realize that Musia catching up to her wasn't such a laughing matter after all. "Seriously, having you train everyone was the right choice in all sorts of ways! You're improving, everyone else is improving, and I got to spend the whole time slacking off!"

"I-I'm not so sure that last part was an upside, really," Musia interjected.

"I think things are gonna be pretty busy for you from now on, but keep up the good work!" Charlotte replied. All responsibility for the unit's training had been handed off...

"I-I will! Thank you!"

...but fortunately, Musia was ready and willing to accept it.

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"So, yeah—thanks to Musia, the mage unit's better than ever!" said Charlotte as she wrapped up her report at one of our regular meetings.

Musia, who was sitting beside her, looked mortified to see herself put on such a pedestal. The way Charlotte had described it Musia had proven to be an incredibly skillful teacher, and thanks to her guidance, the majority of the mages in their unit had improved their skills by leaps and bounds.

I'd known that Musia had the talent to be an incredible mage, but the fact that she was a skilled teacher as well had escaped me.

Actually, my skill doesn't display anything about people's teaching ability in their status blocks, so there was no way for me to figure that out from the get go!

"I have to wonder, though—if it was this easy for them to improve this quickly, then what the hell has their *old* teacher been doing this whole time?" Thomas muttered—though not quietly enough for Charlotte to miss it.

"H-Hey, was that supposed to be an insult?! I've been doing my damndest to teach them, I'll have you know!" Charlotte shouted.

Oh, right. I guess she's been handling all the instruction up until now.

When I really thought about it, considering that Charlotte had been capable of casting mind-bogglingly powerful spells from the start without ever receiving any instructions, asking her to teach anyone about magic was a lost cause.

"Oh, right, one more thing! Looks like teaching all the other mages helped Musia get way stronger too," Charlotte added.

That came as a surprise to me. I'd expected that Musia's progress would have slowed since she'd been paying so much attention to tutoring the others, but apparently, I couldn't have been more wrong about that. I decided to appraise her and see for myself.

LEA: 60/76

VAL: 77/79

INT: 51/73

POL: 56/75

Ambition: 32

Charlotte was right—all of Musia's stats had improved, and her Valor score was getting very close to its maximum value. Generally speaking, the closer stats got to their caps the harder it became to increase them, but I had a feeling that Musia would reach her maximum Valor in no time at all. Her Leadership had grown dramatically as well, and I had to wonder if the respect she'd gained from her fellow soldiers had something to do with that increase. Regardless, it seemed that her skill with magic wasn't the only area she'd improved in thanks to her lessons.

Considering that all of her stats had been in the forties when I first met her, it was remarkable just how much she'd improved. Not just remarkable, actually—given how little time had passed since I'd recruited her, the rate she'd grown at was nothing short of unbelievable.

People with Valor scores in the seventies or above weren't too rare, but people with Valor that high *and* a high Mage Aptitude were very hard to find. Charlotte and Musia were the only ones in Canarre's whole fighting force, in fact. Considering how important mages were in modern warfare, it seemed safe to say that Musia had become one of our army's most valuable assets.

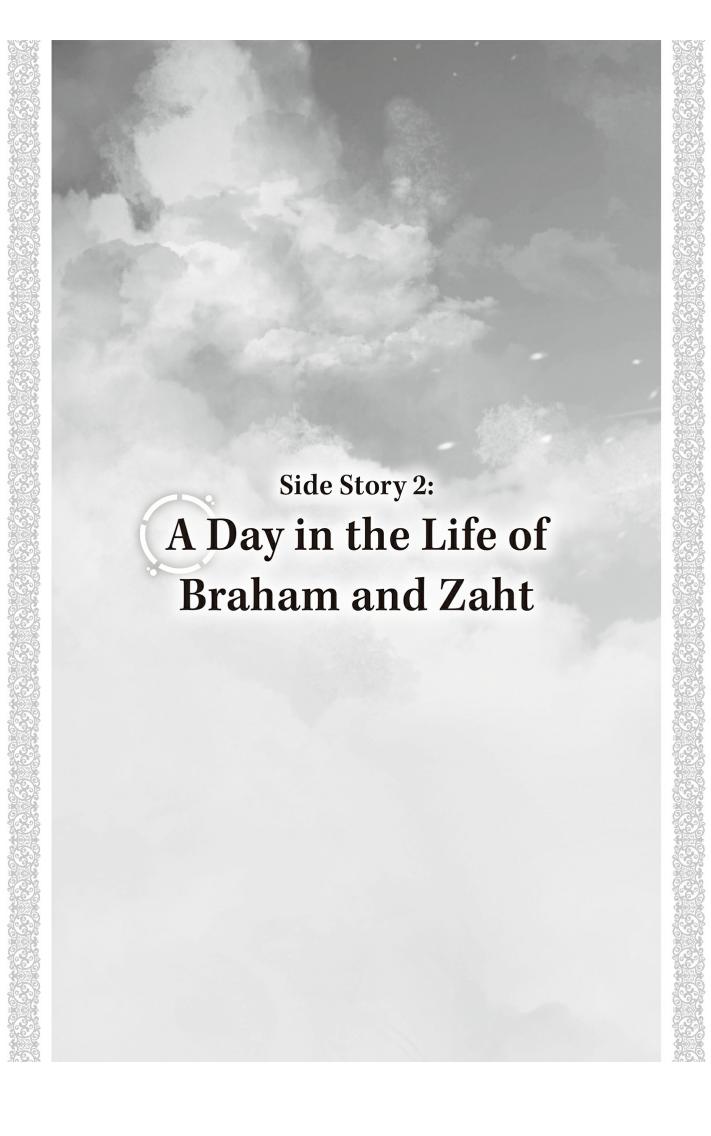
Now that I was looking at Musia's stats again, it also struck me how balanced her maximum values were. I was starting to consider giving her command of her own unit of mages in the future. After all, if we kept bringing in more capable casters, Charlotte would probably have difficulties commanding all of them.

"Thank you for providing guidance to the rest of our mages, Musia," I said. "Having more capable mages on our side is a massive asset to Canarre, and as such, I've decided to grant you a reward for your efforts on top of your usual salary."

"What?!" Musia yelped. "A reward?! F-For me, of all people?!"

"Consider it a sign of how valuable I consider the work you've been doing. I trust nobody objects?"

None of my other retainers spoke up to protest the decision. And so, Musia's reward was set in stone. A few days later I presented her with twenty gold coins—a sum of money so large she literally fainted on the spot the moment I handed it over to her.



One day, Braham's squad of elite soldiers was hard at work running through exercises in the Canarre military's training grounds. The squad's members were elite in more than name alone—only the most exceptional soldiers in the military were selected to join the group. That meant that, by and large, the squad's members were already quite capable at the time they began working under Braham...but there were some exceptions.

"Hey... Do you really think that guy has what it takes to keep up with the squad?" Braham asked his second-in-command, Zaht, as the two of them watched their men run through their exercises.

Braham didn't need to specify which soldier he was talking about. One of them, a rather slender and short young man, was conspicuously inept. His name was Kuura, and he was not only unathletic but also all but useless when it came to wielding weaponry.

"Good question," said Zaht. "It's pretty hard to believe, just watching him... but apparently, he's got talent buried deep down somewhere, and we're supposed to find a way to drag it out of him."

"Okay, but do you believe that? Just look at him! I've never seen anyone with less talent," said Braham. He just couldn't believe that a man like Kuura could ever manage to toughen up.

"The count's power claims otherwise," Zaht said with a shrug.

"Hmm... But even Lord Ars has to get stuff wrong every once in a while, right?" Braham countered.

"It's possible, but it also doesn't make a difference, as far as we're concerned.

He told us that Kuura has talent and asked us to train him, so that's what we have to do, one way or another."

Braham sighed deeply.

"Yeah, true 'nuff. We'll just have to put him through the wringer and tell Lord Ars if it doesn't look like he's gonna shape up," he said, confident that within a few days at most, he'd be reporting to Ars that Kuura was a washout. "Anyway, training him's in your hands, Zaht. Good luck with that."

"Wh-What?! You want me to do it?!"

Zaht wasn't even slightly excited to hear his new assignment, but unfortunately for him, he also wasn't the sort of person who would ever disobey a commanding officer's direct order. And so, Zaht begrudgingly took over Kuura's martial education.

A few days later, Braham's mind was blown.

"I-I don't believe it," he muttered, his eyes as wide as dinner plates as he watched Kuura run through his drills.

Braham had known that Kuura and Zaht had been training together, but what he hadn't anticipated was how quickly those sessions would bear fruit. Kuura's lack of athleticism hadn't been remedied, to be clear. He looked as weak and emaciated as ever. What had changed, however, were his results in battle. Kuura had just engaged several far larger and stronger soldiers in practice duels, and had defeated each and every one of them in sequence.

"Wh-What the hell am I looking at? How is he this good all of a sudden?" Braham asked Zaht, the man who was presumably responsible for Kuura's explosive growth.

"He's got good eyes," Zaht flatly explained. "I'm not just talking about his vision, though that's good too—I mean he's one of the most observant people I've ever met. He can more or less tell what his opponent's about to do, just by watching the way they move in anticipation of it. He's still weak, of course, but that's offset by his incredible knack for swordsmanship. He may not have much muscle, but he's incredible at bringing out the full potential of what he does have."

"I guess that'd do it. Speed and power are the most important factors in a fight, usually, but if you're observant enough you can make up for not being fast, and if you're good enough with a sword you can make up for not having much power," said Braham. "But wait a sec—he has a knack for swordsmanship? I thought he was awful at that."

"He was, until I started training him," said Zaht. "Once he picked up the fundamentals, he started improving at a breakneck pace. Most people with talent show it from the very start, but I guess he needed a little boost first. He's a rare breed."

"He really improved that much...?" muttered Braham in disbelief.

"His strength and stamina still have a long way to go, so he has his limits. Put him up against a tough enough opponent, and he won't be able to win even if he can see through their movements. Once he's put on some muscle, though, I have a feeling he'll be a force to be reckoned with."

"Ugh... More than anything, I'm shocked that I couldn't pick any of this out at first," Braham groaned as he watched Kuura engage in yet another practice match.

"I'd say this is less a matter of you having no eye for people, and more a matter of Lord Ars's power being something else," said Zaht. "If Kuura had asked to join a unit I was leading, I would've given him a test and then turned him down on the spot. I certainly don't think I would've guessed that his swordsmanship would improve this quickly. Some people have talent hidden away inside them, and in Kuura's case, *all* of his talent was hidden so deep, it might as well have been buried. The fact that anyone could pick it out is a wonder."

"I guess Ars's power really can see through any talent, no matter how hidden it is, and he's gonna keep picking people out for this squad..." Braham muttered. "Just how incredible are we gonna be in the long run?"

"I'd say that depends on whether or not you can shape up, Captain."

"Hey! What's that supposed to mean?! Ars is the one who picked me to be the leader, you know?!"

"He really is impressive, isn't he? If you'd come to me and asked to be my retainer, I would've turned you down without a second thought."

"Could you at least pretend to have some respect for me?"

"I was kidding. Anyway, if we want to be the elites people keep calling us, we'd better get back to training," Zaht said, then set off to join his men in their drills.

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The next day, during one of Braham's unit's scheduled breaks, Braham and Zaht were strolling through the streets of Canarre together.

"Why do I have to spend my day off walking around town with you, Captain?"

Zaht sighed.

"Why're you making it sound like that's a bad thing?" Braham shot back. "And anyway, I told you about how I figured it'd be good to get some bonding time with my second-in-command, didn't I?"

"Actually, no, you didn't. You dragged me out here without a word of explanation," Zaht said with a roll of his eyes.

"Oh." said Braham. "Really? Well, whatever! That's the goal, so let's have a blast!"

"What kind of goal is that even supposed to be...? And where are we going, anyway?"

"The market, to start! Figured we'd get something for lunch afterward, then play it by ear from there."

"So you don't even have a plan. Fabulous. I'll tag along, but I hope you're planning on paying for the meal."

"Huh?! Y-You mean, like, for both of us?"

"Isn't it a captain's job to provide for his men?"

"Ugh... F-Fine, sure! Grub's on me today!" said Braham with a grimace. "Anyway," he continued as he looked out across the city street, "Canarre sure has changed a lot, huh?"

"It's certainly more crowded these days," Zaht agreed.

It hadn't been all that long since Braham and Zaht took up residence in Canarre, but the change was still striking to them. The city was far livelier than it had been when they'd first arrived.

"I thought this place was pretty quaint compared to Velshdt back when I first

got here, but I think there might be as many people here now as there were back there," Braham mused as he thought back to the last city he'd lived in.

"My understanding is that Velshdt is the third largest city in all of Missian, by population," said Zaht. "If you're right about that, then the change might be even more incredible than I gave it credit for."

"I mean, I'm just judging by looks here! No clue how many folks are actually around. But anyway, more people's a good thing for sure! Means we'll have an easier time finding recruits, for one thing. No wonder we've been getting so many new faces in the unit!" Braham said with a grin.

Before long, Braham and Zaht arrived at the city's marketplace. Canarre's main street had been bustling, and the market was even more packed. The area was practically overflowing with people.

"Yikes," muttered Braham. "We're gonna have a rough time buying anything, huh?"

"Were you looking for something in particular?" asked Zaht.

"Huh? I mean, nothing super specific..."

"Then there's no point in bothering. Let's leave."

"W-Wait a second! I, uhh... Right! I wanted to see if they had any weird weapons in stock! And books! I wanted some of those too!" exclaimed Braham.

Zaht gave his captain a blank stare. "The weapons are one thing, but books? Can you even read, Captain?"

"Yes, I can read, dammit! Say that again to my face, I dare you!"

"R-Right, sorry," Zaht said, flinching in the face of Braham's rage.

Braham took a deep breath, then continued, "We've been getting more

merchants in town lately, and that means a bigger variety of stuff in the market—and that includes stuff that's never been available in Canarre before."

"That would make sense," said Zaht. "I've never been much for crowds, so I've never been to a place like this before, but if there's that much available here then maybe this visit wasn't such a bad idea after all."

"Why, are you looking for something?"

"I could be... I wouldn't turn down some nice alcohol."

"You'd better not pull a Mireille on me, Zaht."

"I'm not nearly as much of a drinker as she is, don't worry. I just enjoy a nice drink as much as the next person."

"I'm kinda surprised, honestly," said Braham. "Don't think I've ever seen you drinking before."

"That would be because I haven't, lately," replied Zaht. "Not to mention that even when I do, the alcohol never seems to have much of an effect on me."

"Huh! Well, I'm pretty sure there'll be plenty of booze for you around here. I hear some of the guys in our unit brag about how they picked up a bottle of some rare drink or another in the market, every once in a while."

Braham and Zaht walked through the marketplace, searching for stores that stocked the items they were interested in. It wasn't long at all before Zaht found a store with alcohol that caught his attention, which he purchased on the spot. It was a rare import from the Duchy of Ansel that he'd sampled before, and he purchased it in no small part out of nostalgia.

Braham, meanwhile, found a weapon that caught his attention: an unusually narrow variety of sword that was used for thrusting attacks called a rapier. Zaht had been rather skeptical of the design and asked if Braham actually meant to

use it in battle, and Braham had replied that he just thought it looked neat, and bought it anyway. It didn't seem like he had much interest in actually using the weapon at all. As for books, Braham wasn't able to find anything along the lines of what he was looking for, and didn't end up making any purchases.

"All right, I'm getting pretty hungry! Let's go find somewhere to stop for lunch," Braham eventually said.

"Works for me," agreed Zaht with a nod.

"More restaurants these days too," said Braham. "This city's just getting nicer and nicer the more people show up and the more it grows!"

"You have a point...but not everything a rising population brings is for the better," noted Zaht.

"Ahh, yeah, I know what you mean," Braham agreed as he glanced at a beggar who happened to be sitting by the wayside.

As the population of Canarre grew, so too grew the population of poor and unemployed residents. There was just no way to build enough houses for all of the new people flowing into the city, which inevitably led to a ballooning homeless population.

"We're gonna have to do something about that eventually, huh?" Braham mused.

"If by 'we' you mean Rietz, then yes," said Zaht. "I'm sure he's already hard at work coming up with a solution. Considering how abrupt the population boom has been, though, I have to wonder if he'll be able to keep up."

"It's a tough problem, all right," Braham groaned.

"Not to mention that a larger population means more crime."

"True enough...and keeping the peace is part of our job, since we're in the army and all," said Braham.

No sooner had the words left his mouth than Braham noticed a somewhat young, obviously impoverished man approaching a well-dressed woman who was walking along further down the street. Something about the way the man was acting struck Braham as suspicious, and sure enough, the moment he was close enough to the woman the man snatched the bag she was carrying and set off at a sprint.

"Thief! Thief!" the woman screamed.

In an instant, Braham took off in pursuit of the man. The thief had a substantial head start, but Braham was a much faster runner and closed the distance between them in the blink of an eye.

"Wh-What the-Who's that?! How's he so fast?!" the thief yelped as he glanced over his shoulder and saw Braham bearing down on him. He wasn't a slow runner by any means, but even compared to him, Braham's pace was downright unbelievable.

The thief decided to shake Braham off his trail by ducking into a back alley, but he didn't even manage to make it that far before Braham caught up to him. That must have made the thief panic, because the next thing he knew he'd tripped over his own feet and slammed face-first into the street. Braham didn't let that opportunity slip past him, and pinned the fallen thief to the ground.

"L-Lemme go!" the thief shouted. He struggled wildly, but Braham's grip proved far too strong for him to shake off.

"Oh, calm down! You're a thief, right? You just stole that bag, didn't you?" shouted Braham.

"No, I didn't! It's mine!" the thief yelled back.

"I saw you take it from someone," Braham sighed. "If you can't think up a better excuse, you might as well not bother."

It wasn't long before the woman the bag had been stolen from and Zaht came running.

"Th-Thank you so much for catching him!" said the woman. The thief had dropped her bag when he fell, and the woman quickly scooped it up again. "I must do something to thank you..."

"No need for that! We're with the army—all in a day's work," said Braham. The woman thanked him profusely once more, then went on her way. "Question is, what're we going to do about him?" Braham said, looking back at the fallen thief.

"We should turn him over to the guards who're in charge of this district," said Zaht. "For all we know, this might not be his first offense."

Each district of Canarre was watched over by a squad of guards, who were in turn associated with the army of Canarre. Braham ended up bringing the thief to the local division, where he turned him over to the proper authorities.

"Phew! Guess we ended up being on the job today after all, eh? Sure didn't see that coming," said Braham once the handoff was complete.

"Crime's on the rise, so it's not too shocking," said Zaht. "I've heard they're hiring more and more guards, but there still aren't enough on patrol to keep the peace yet."

"Seemed like the guy we caught turned to crime because he couldn't make a living any other way..." Braham mused. "Do you think that if we can make Canarre more and more prosperous, crime will start to go down, too?"

"That's hard to say," said Zaht. "I've been to bigger cities than this, and in my experience there's always a stark gap between the rich and the poor, no matter where you go. It's easy to talk about bringing in wealth and prosperity for everyone, but making it happen never seems to be quite that simple."

"That so? Well, one way or another, I'm sure it'll all work out in the end. House Louvent's in charge, after all, and they've got all the right people to sort this stuff out!"

"True enough. There's Rietz, to start, and also Charlotte, Rosell, and Mireille. Every one of them is a genius in their field—and of course you can't forget Lord Ars and the power he wields that brought them all together."

"H-Hey, aren't you forgetting someone?" said Braham.

"Hm?" Zaht grunted. "Oh, right-Thomas. He may not be in House Louvent's formal employ yet, but he's still a remarkable man."

"Not him!"

"You mean the Fujimiya siblings? They've only just come into the picture and haven't achieved anything yet, but judging by what few interactions I've had with them so far, I'm expecting good things."

"Not them, either! Dammit, Zaht, you're doing this on purpose! There's another handpicked genius right here with you!"

"Right here? Oh...do you mean me? I hate to say it, but I know that I don't measure up to the others. I'm more capable than the average person you can find on the streets, though, I'll give you that much."

"I said with you! Of course I didn't mean you!"

Zaht let out a lengthy sigh and replied, "You do know how conceited people who call themselves geniuses in public come across, don't you?"

"I knew it! You were doing it on purpose!" Braham exploded. Zaht's shoulders shook with barely repressed laughter as he watched his commander devolve into a rage. "I'll have you know that Lord Ars specifically told me that I have what it takes to be the greatest commander in the whole world! Making fun of me's the same thing as making fun of the count himself!"

"Fair enough—I must have been mistaken. My apologies," said Zaht in a profoundly insincere tone.

"Not sure I buy that...but an apology's an apology, so you're off the hook," Braham said, somewhat reluctantly.

With that, Braham and Zaht set out to find lunch, then made their way back home again.

## **Afterword**

Thank you very much for purchasing volume five of this series. This is Miraijin A, speaking!

Due to the continued support of all my readers, this series will be receiving an anime adaptation! Ever since I became a writer, I've dreamed that someday one of my works would be turned into an anime and reach an even broader audience. I'm truly moved to think that that dream is coming true. I couldn't be happier—thank you all so much!

It took several months after my editor told me this series would be receiving an anime adaptation for me to believe the news, to be honest (lol). It was great to see the news finally announced in public, and I've been able to observe all sorts of parts of the adaptation process. All of this is totally new to me, naturally, and it's been a very valuable experience!

The anime is scheduled to be broadcast in 2024. Speaking as the series's author, I can hardly wait for it to begin, and I like to think that my readers are just as excited. The story of *As a Reincarnated Aristocrat, I'll Use My Appraisal Skill to Rise in the World* still has a long way to go, and I hope that the anime adaptation will bring in more and more fans! I'll keep writing away to meet the expectations of all the readers who are anxiously awaiting the next installment!

Thank you very much for continuing to read this series!

## Author

## Miraijin A

Thank you very much for purchasing the fifth volume. This series is getting an anime adaptation! It's scheduled to broadcast next year, and I hope all of you watch it! [English Editor's Note: The anime should be out now, so go check it out!]

Illust.

## jimmy

Congratulations on the anime adaptation! I can't wait! New characters have been showing up left and right in the novels lately. Thanks for reading!

As a Reincarnated Aristocrat, I'll Use My Appraisal Skill to Rise in the World 5

KODANSHA COMICS Digital Edition

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