



Min-Maxing
My **TRPG**
Build in
Another
World

Preach the Good Word
of Mr. Henderson

9

Canto II

Author
Schuld

Illustrator
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Schnee

“Your blood
reekin’ like it does,
you just don’t got
the savvy to
slip past this
li’l stray’s
sniffer.”

“You
spotted me,
then, did you,
cat?”

Beatrix



Nanna

Erich

Fidelio

Nanna glared at me with a look that said, *You didn't warn me!* but all I could do was evade her gaze and puff on my pipe as nonchalantly as possible.

My victory
here would decide
the flow of the
entire battle.

“Allow me
to ask something...
Have you ever met
an adventurer who
would retreat from
the battlefield?”

“I see...
Fine logic.”



The Henderson Scale

- 9:** Everything is as it should be and everyone enjoys a happy end to end all happy ends.
- 1:** The dragon is slain, the princess is saved, and the adventurers raise up a toast at the pub.
- 0:** For better or for worse, things go according to the GM and players' plans.
- 0.5:** A tangent impacts the main story.
E.g. "Wow, everyone's responding really well to the enemies this time!"
- 0.75:** A minor storyline takes the place of the main plot.
E.g. "Wait, hold on—the PCs are switching sides?!"
- 1.0:** Some fatal mistake prevents the true ending from ever coming to fruition.
E.g. "I told you, there's no point in saving this lot!
You do realize it'll be all-out war if you try, right?"
- 1.25:** The GM condemns his players but tries to figure out how to continue in their next session.
E.g. "You want to turn your old base and the entire country against you for your *enemies*? I haven't prepped any extra material for this..."
- 1.5:** The party intentionally wipes.
E.g. "Do you *have* to be so stereotypically Japanese and get pumped for a fight that I've told you there's no hope of winning?"
- 1.75:** The players commit genocide or otherwise move to bring the setting to its knees. The GM silently shuts his screen.
E.g. "Yes, yes, I'm happy you like the characters I made, but did you have to go ahead and swear all those suicide pacts with them? Fine, I'll rewrite the story..."
- 2.0:** The main story is irreparably busted. The campaign ends.
E.g. The GM packs his things without a word.
- Over:** The realm of gods. Despite experiencing everything from 0.5 to 1.75, the players continue on for whatever reason—and somehow progress the story. After an unknowable amount of time, the characters find some new objective and dutifully complete it.
2.0
E.g. The GM spends two days scribbling up all-new developments, and after a painstaking old-school story of redemption (that totally wasn't cribbed from somewhere else...), the PCs forgo any old debts and slay their former friends and allies in order to save their new enemies-turned-friends. Let's ignore the fact that the original storyline was totally lost along the way.

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CHARACTER

Name

Beatrix

Race

Mensch

Position

Enemy

Specialties

Mana Output VIII

Skills

- ◆ Bare-Handed Grappling
- ◆ Empowered Strikes
- ◆ Stealth

Traits

- ◆ Lay Mage
- ◆ Lily of the Valley's Poison
- ◆ Skeletal Saint's Enchantment



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Preface

Tabletop Role-Playing Game (TRPG)

An analog version of the RPG format utilizing paper rulebooks and dice.

A form of performance art where the GM (Game Master) and players carve out the details of a story from an initial outline.

The PCs (Player Characters) are born from the details on their character sheets. Each player lives through their PC as they overcome the GM's trials to reach the final ending.

Nowadays, there are countless types of TRPGs, spanning genres that include fantasy, sci-fi, horror, modern chuanqi, shooters, postapocalyptic, and even niche settings such as those based on idols or maids.

There are few points in one's life where a loss can be described as absolute. After all, life isn't as logical as an ehrengarde game, nor do you have the board left over to reflect on what went wrong—all you have are your unreliable memories and mercurial regrets. Any given situation, taken as a whole, makes for such a complex tangle of fates that it makes you question the efficacy of your local gods' managerial skills. There are just as few moments in one's life where your fate really hinges on a few tiny, infinitely flexible decisions.

The assassins were unable to say with certainty what it was that had put them in such a corner.

“O-Oww...”

After the arrival of an inexplicable whirlwind, the assassins were forced to retreat to Marsheim's sewers—which were far more noisome than the capital's nigh on immaculate system. None of them knew what had caused the sudden gusts; you couldn't rely on mere meteorology to explain a freak cyclone strong enough to pitch bricks and trash at flesh-ripping speeds, confined to a single walled-in lot.

The pained groan came from the small-statured assassin that had taken the brunt of Erich's heavy sword swing. She cast off her hooded cloak to reveal a small, furred body, not even a sword's length in height, covered in a sleek umber coat. In Rhinian they were called hlessil, or, as less charitable folk of the northern isles had dubbed them, *drolljacks*—a foul, cruel name, meant to mark them as a race of clowns at best and incorrigible bandits at worst.

In her cloak, the hlessi's silhouette resembled that of a mensch child well enough, but out of it, you could see her digitigrade legs and the tall ears atop her head.

"I... 'urts..." she whispered, clutching at her wounded left arm; in agony as she was, it was not pain that constricted her voice—she was steelier than that—but *biology*. Her kith were not gifted with the robust vocal cords of other demihumans; they could speak only in hushed, breathy tones and high screams. This hard limit on their expressive range relative to most other thinking beings—confined to private, quiet correspondence or the sound of naked desperation—painted a target on their backs, especially in less tolerant realms than the Empire.

Tears trickled out from her eyes—almost fully black, due to the size of her pupils and sclerae. Her nose ran terribly. Her face showed the creeping discovery of her own agony plain as day. The most hardened fighters could fight through their pain. A rush of endorphins and a finely honed battle instinct had let her silence the alarm bells in her brain, but with the fight over, they had receded. The searing pain in her arm took hold of her attention with an iron grip now. Taking a fatal blow with one's arm had been perfectly logical in the heat of battle, but now her arm was heavy and throbbing.

"Lepsia, you okay? I'm here."

The one who called out to the hlessi was a vierman—her four arms bared as her cloak trailed behind her. She came silently around a bend in the sewers to lend support to her companion as the hlessi crumpled to the ground.

Out of all her crew, she had the most cause to go about cloaked. Viermen looked essentially identical to mensch—but for the extra set of arms tucked just under the first shoulder blades. Most of her species found it convenient to

conceal their midlimbs from prying eyes, tucking them back and out of sight under heavy clothes in public. A midlimb could never be as quick or as strong as either arm from the prime set, but the novelty and versatility of the extra arms had a way of attracting folk convinced that a vierman was just a natural step up from boring old mensch.

This vierman woman in particular wore long gloves over all four of her arms, and most of her body was covered in a leather cloak. The faint glimpses of dusky skin through the slits in her clothes at the thighs and upper arms—like Rhinian red tea faintly diluted with milk—suggested an ancestry that her face, now unconcealed, confirmed. The shade of her black, short-bobbed hair, in conjunction with the rest, suggested that she'd come—be it by descent or by sojourn—from the deserts, steppes, and the great salt lake south of the hamadas that crossed the Eastern Passage. One could guess that, one way or another, it was Rhine's last war that had delivered her to this side of the border.

“Bleeding stopped? Everyone worried,” the vierman said to the hlessi.

“Shahrnaz...” Lepsia replied.

The peoples of the east didn't have such deep-set eyes as those in the Empire, but many of them had long eyelashes. Shahrnaz's reddish-black eyes were colored with an unmistakable concern.

“Can you move?”

“No...’an’t...”

“Okay. I carry. Be strong.”

Shahrnaz carefully placed her arms around Lepsia and gathered up her small companion. Her midlimbs braced her back and knees while her first pair cradled her small friend's shoulders and legs for optimal safety.

“Where's 'e o'ers...?”

“All together. The Sheikh too.”

Marsheim's sewage system paled in quality compared to Berylin's. There were fewer slimes put to work less competently, and so the air was thick and foul. Shahrnaz carried her wounded fellow with silent footsteps. It was not the

way a warrior ran—these steps were honed by a life in the shadows.

Everything about the way Shahrnaz moved indicated that she was no mere fighter.

She slowed her steps as she reached a bend, focused her hearing, and drew out a small pocket mirror to check what lay ahead. She didn't move immediately, however—she checked once more that she wasn't being pursued before pressing onward. Everything she did reeked of reconnaissance training.

But Shahrnaz was no mere snoop or scout. She'd had to be absolutely covert—her work hinged on her ability to devise and dispense death without leaving any trace of her involvement.

Finally the pair of them reached an open area about the size of a room at a small inn.

“Doing quite all right, Lepsia?” a voice came echoing down from the ceiling. Across the room, two figures clung to the walls surrounding the passage leading onward. Both entrance and exit were narrow; perhaps this room was a spillway for overflow during heavy rains.

One of the figures was a huge arachne woman. If you crossed the Narrow Road Islands past the southern continent's eastern edge, you would find yourself on the subcontinent located on the central continent's southernmost peninsula. It was here that huntsman arachne could be found.

Huntsman arachne eschewed the use of their webbing for nests, unlike their kin, the jumping spider arachne. Neither were they like their tarantula compatriots, who used their webs to extend the reach of their senses. No, a huntsman's webs were meant for combat.

Huntsman arachne were physical fighters. They were the largest of their kith, with the might and leverage to topple a callistian with ease. They were quite the oddity among arachne, known as they were to quickly circle and ensnare their prey to satiate their hunting cravings. At times, they gave up their spoils to use them as bait to take down an even greater quarry. In contrast with this fearsome reputation, this woman's voice was incredibly calm and gentle.

“*Main* was rather worried. *Main* should have fought off that swordsman...”

the arachne went on.

The arachne was still wearing her hood and veil; what skin she bared was a creamy, perhaps sandy color. Her Rhinian was natural and well enunciated, save that—for reasons unique to her—she refused to use Rhinian pronouns. Thus, no one knew her true name. Her teammates simply called her by the word she used to address herself: “Main.” There was no deep meaning to it; it was simply a foreign word of a language spoken in the subcontinent that meant “I” or “me.”

“A sword is easier to snag than a spear for Main. And for *tum*, well, it’s easier for *tum*’s speed to deal with a quick spear, is it not? *Ve* were quite a handful for *ham*...”

Main’s teammates already knew that *tum* meant “you,” *ve* was “they,” and *ham* was “we” or “us.” Main’s language didn’t mark gender via pronouns—whichever she spoke of, the third person singular was “*vah*.”

The arachne’s well-structured face showed obvious concern as she examined the injured Lepsia. The steady flame of her hunger for vengeance upon the adventurer who had so grievously wounded her comrade blazed behind those long-lashed golden eyes.

“But Main... They s’ole your ’eb...” Lepsia said.

“Main’s web?” the arachne replied. “No, no, Main let *ve* take *vah*. Main can make more, and *vah*’s so much harder to use when a weapon tangles or cuts *vah*.”

The arachne’s “garrote wire” was spun from her own natural reserve, meaning that it could be abandoned without much cost. It was useful for throwing her foes off-balance and ensnaring their weapons. Its disposability was key to its tactical convenience—it was, in short, a “fire and forget” weapon.

It was as Main had said—the mensch swordsman would probably have made a more suitable opponent for her. A sword’s grip was nothing like a spear’s; to many sword fighters it was like an extension of their arm. The most well-trained sword fighters were sensitive to the slightest disturbance of their blade, and so having a web tangle all of its cutting edge made for an incredible nuisance. It would be like forcing a master pianist to play in boxing gloves. Losing your

delicate senses was a difficult thing to bear.

Main had no notion of this, but although Erich had a small library of countermeasures to attacks or interruptions from his foes, his style of fighting put a heavy focus on *prevention*. He worked to always remain one step ahead of his enemy, and that meant he was unguarded when it came to direct meddling. It was ironic, considering how many of his ploys hinged on a well-timed use of his Disarm skill. One could not blame the young adventurer—the fault most likely could be found in the fact that he had found a legendary weapon so early in his life. The Craving Blade could neither be stolen nor destroyed, and so any concern he might otherwise have felt about the threat of having his own moves being turned against him had been shelved away to gather dust.

Goldilocks's limited arsenal was a self-imposed weakness; given no other choice or further time to develop, he would most likely realize his misstep and correct course with suitable countermeasures, eventually. But until that day came, Main knew she had an edge.

"No, ik's my faulk for nok *tik* finishing her. I'm *tik* sorry," said the other figure who had also taken up a position on the wall.

Her shadow loomed large as she swooped down, but she landed with less sound than a single drop of rain. Her long silver hair fell in tresses over the more human half of her frame, glowing slightly in the gloom.

"Primanne, don't be ridiculous! Even ham didn't notice until the last moment. Ve's scout is truly talented," Main retorted.

"Yes, *tik* buk, ik's my job to nokice surprise akkacks and *tik* dispakch them," the kaggen replied.

Unlike the other three, Primanne was of a race with a long history on the central continent. In particular, you could find them in the Empire's upstart western neighbor, the Kingdom of Seine. Sadly, said history there was more troubled than that of their mensch and methuselah neighbors; an entire population born permanently brandishing deadly shears at the ends of their arms was bound to struggle with getting on in polite society, whether or not they had simple prehensile tarsi to reach out and hold at the true ends of those

deadly meathooks.

Upon her bamboo-leaf-shaped torso were two wings that allowed for short flight. Unfortunately their large bodies meant that they couldn't fly as well as other insectoid demihumans, and they paled in comparison to the wing power of sirens. Complicating their social prospects further, a kaggen's lower mandible was an unusual, delicate assemblage—one that only someone with truly masterful elocution could use to speak in humanfolk tongues without inadvertent clicks and perennial difficulties with certain consonants.

"If only I killed the swordsman and thak scouk to *tik* skark with..." the kaggen muttered.

Primanne had removed her hood—an item enchanted for covert operations that not only cast the wearer's face in shadow, but also hid their expression and eyeline from onlookers—to reveal an attractive face. The people of Seine favored healthy, sun-kissed skin; Primanne's elegant face was the color of wheat. She had innocent eyes that drooped slightly at the edges and a small beauty mark on one side of them—a coveted feature in her homeland.

Perhaps the most distinguishing feature of a kaggen's face was their large bifurcated jaw—a trait guaranteed to replace any impression of sweetness and charm with an aura of predatory menace in all but the most ardent and courageous of freaks. If she stood with her mouth shut, your average passerby would simply think that she was a refined beauty from the western lands. However, her image changed as soon as she spoke; her jaw opened horizontally, splitting neatly down the middle. Even at rest, closer observation could handily reveal the seams; it left a false impression of puppetlike artificiality. Even *sepa* had an easier time managing the social hurdles posed by their anatomy, learning to lip-sync around their envenomed mandibles.

"I'm jusk so *tik* fruskraked... I should have *tik* killed thak arachne girl..." Primanne went on.

Many in the Empire felt uncomfortable when they heard kaggen speak Rhinian and some struggled to interpret them at all. All the same, it was hardly worth blaming them for their own evolutionary quirks. Though for most kaggen, the soul-deep hurt of alienation itself (putting aside the matter of the *material*

inequities) was a nonissue. Kaggen were an oddity in that they were, if not *asocial*, then certainly *socially agnostic*. Language, theory of mind, and the ability to participate in communities were not integral to their way of life—most felt no need for companionship outside of reproduction, and had the guts of steel and vicious immune system necessary to abide quite happily in total solitude. Primanne was out of the ordinary; most kaggen would never bother to learn Rhinian and attempt to integrate into *any* society, let alone a foreign one.

“No... If o’ly I cu’ down tha’ s’upid swor’sman...” Lepsia interjected.

“I am fault,” Shahrnaz said. “Should have not used bolts. Should have come.”

“Main got greedy,” Main added. “Main wanted to launch a surprise attack, but Main should have gone for the swordsman or the target instead...”

“No, no... I didn’k *tik* nokice them approach. I should’ve done a bekker *tik* job.”

Each one of these assassins was a veteran of their trade. They might have suffered defeat today, but their dedication to their work led them to consider all of the possible other scenarios that would have shut down or averted their conflict with the adventurers who had interrupted their mission. A less skilled group would not have felt the sting of regret so dearly; they knew their limits and the limits of their foes too well. They’d played poorly, and they knew it—now they could only ruminate on where they’d gone wrong, and how to avoid repeating their mistakes.

A single clap put an end to their complaining. It seemed to clear the air itself out of the room; the four assassins fixed their collective gaze on the end of the room, where a figure stood among the shadows.

“Are we feeling better now?”

The voice came from a mensch woman whose appearance was at odds with the grimy surroundings; her fancy black evening gown looked better suited to a noble’s manor. She was tall and slender, yet the dress, with its copious frills and ribbons, seemed a measure too up to speed with a young girl’s tastes. If she were at a ball, one might chalk up her choice to contrast her height and her girlish sensibility in hopes it would stand out fashionably and curry favor with those looking to play favorites or play the field with their freak flags in full

display—but any action to be found *here* surely wouldn't care for such frippery.

The complex tattoos that stood out here and there where a little skin showed—at her upper arms or thighs, where her gloves and boots ended—were a clear sign that she wasn't just a woman with a discerning eye for fine clothes. She was covered in magic formulae. Such magic circles had gone out of fashion around two centuries ago—on the campus of the Imperial College, such markings had been denounced as “overblown and pretentious,” the indelible mark of a deeply insecure magician—but this woman favored them. She had tattooed them onto her very skin so as to leverage their reality-warping abilities to the utmost extent.

She didn't have a staff—otherwise a signature of the magus's trade—but she did have a ring that glittered dimly on her gloved left hand. An older magus would probably label her as a mage with quite the vintage taste. Or they would laugh in her face at her refusal to get with the times.

Magia weren't just technocrats—they were nobility in their own right. Many had forgotten, or hadn't realized, that among the things they discarded for the sake of elegance or ease were techniques that made up for this discrepancy. On this matter, she had freed herself from the unnecessary shackles of nobility and the bitter gossip of the bureaucratic world, and instead poured her efforts into her talents. In a way, in emulating the ways of the magia of old, she was perhaps a more fitting magus than those she had left behind.



“Yes, but Sheikh...” Shahrnaz said.

“We’ll discuss what went wrong later,” the woman said. “We shall retreat to our base and treat Lepsia. Be careful with her—the smaller the body, the more severe even the slightest loss of blood becomes, after all.”

“What tell the client...?”

“That is a concern for a later hour. I shall explain... No, actually, I think I’ll have a *word*. It seemed like the drug didn’t work on him.”

“Will we be in trouble?” Shahrnaz asked.

From the shadows, she went on in a voice that caused her entire body to shake—whether from laughter or anger, it wasn’t clear. “We were paid to catch a cat, not hunt a wolf. Did you get a proper look at the man?”

The group lived and died by the quality of its intel. If it was more accurate, then they could plan better for the situation.

“That was Goldilocks Erich,” she went on. “The poets didn’t embellish much, it seems.”

The four other assassins started chattering; that was the name of Marsheim’s most famous rising star! He was making moves to build organizational power and, most famously, had defeated Jonas Baltlinden—the shame of the adventuring community, a man once thought *invincible*. How much would they need to be paid to remove one of the city’s foremost and most upright adventurers?

“When our client missteps, the lot of us suffer for it. A pity that actors of our caliber must endure an amateur’s plot.”

“What should ham do, leader? Main will follow any one of tum’s orders,” the arachne said.

“Go out ahead to B-6; see if that way out is clear. We’ll need a word with our client’s client before we might formulate a better plan.”

The woman stepped forward out into the dim light. Her face was more stern than beautiful. She had sharp, well-defined features, and her pale skin—bluish where the veins ran—indicated that she most likely had roots in Rhine. Even the

headdress, tied with strings that matched her clothes, wasn't cute enough to change her image.

Her jet-black hair was dyed red and purple in places and was cut to ruler-straight dimensions. Perhaps all these elements, too, were chosen with magical purposes in mind.

"Wh-Whak about *tik thak* method?" Primanne asked. "Ah, buk *tik* the cak made off with ik though..."

"No, we cannot," their leader replied. "According to my information network, Goldilocks has noble connections. I doubt we can expect him to have a short fuse we can count on. But it does make our plan of attack simpler."

She scrunched up her narrow eyes—bordered by coral piercings—in a vicious smile. Her mind raced as she adapted her stratagem, sorting through every asset known to her. The corner of her mouth lifted up in a smirk, and the lily of the valley decorating her right cheek scrunched up with it. Even the complex tattoo inked deep into her skin responded to her desire for battle, the formula weaved into it glowing with wicked intent.

"I think I shall provide the youngsters a little lesson," she said, "on what happens when you throw yourself into a fight blind."

The women walked through the room, and despite the water that had settled from the previous day's rain, their footsteps made no sound. After all, even though they had different roles within their team—scout, vanguard, rear guard, mage—they were bound together by their honed covert ability to pass entirely without trace.

This invaluable skill had been won at the end of grueling training and field experience. In the end, though, they would find that this path into the shadows that had been so perfectly prepared for them would deliver them, flailing and drowning, into a deeper dark than they could imagine.

Their fate was not so different from that of any other adventurer who, chasing dreams of heroism, finds themselves rooting about in the gutter for change instead. Even with the most well-trained talents, one misstep could lead them off the path toward their ideals for good.

Ideals and dreams were like a candle in the wind—if the breeze changed even slightly, the flame could wink out for good. And for most ideals, that would be the end of it—a quiet and undignified conclusion, ramifying on no one, signifying nothing. But some ideals, caught in the winds of adversity, shed embers far afield, where they catch, blaze, and drive on with the current until there is nothing left to burn.

“We’ll challenge their adventuring spirit. That newbie evidently didn’t receive his blessing through a clan.”

The assassins, who had entered a darkness from which they could not return, dealt in their silent handiwork not for wealth, but for *blood and blood alone*.

“The One Cup Clan will have our revenge—with interest. He has taken our sister’s limb; we shall take all four of his.”

They were a singular force, the secret queens of their domain. They did not hesitate; they did not question; how could they? What higher authority was there to answer to?

“Let’s leave this place. What awaits us is far more invigorating than the dirty work we’ve been doing. Let the slightly higher grade of trash peddle their distractions to the lower-city’s refuse; our calling has a higher purpose. Don’t you think?”

Four voices called out in response, each in their own tongue, yet seamless in their reinforcement of one another—*yes, always*. These five were no mere pack of overdressed and overpaid brigands; there was no desperation in their hearts. They were angels of death walking among mere mortals; women who lived for evil, upon evil, through evil—designing pretty deaths, arranging pieces on the board of the only game that mattered precisely as it pleased them. Their foulness was enough to pinch your nose at.

They moved deeper into the darkness and out of sight.

[Tips] The Trialist Empire of Rhine is home to races that aren’t seen elsewhere on the Central Continent, some of which aren’t even regarded as human elsewhere.

Early Autumn of the Seventeenth Year

Recovering from Incapacitated Status

When your health drops to zero due to a heavy wound and you are rendered unconscious, it can take some time before you are ready to enter the fray once more. Of course, your rate of recovery depends on the methods used to revive you, but it can often take a long time until you are back in fighting shape.

I realized how long it had been since I last paid a visit to someone in the hospital.

“You’re up a lot earlier than I thought,” I said.

“What’s this, a bed visit fer me?” Schnee replied. “Ya know how ta make a girl smile. But what’s with the watermelon?”

“I thought some fruit would make a nice present.”

Elisa was often sick as a child; I would sit by her side and offer her raspberries that I had picked myself, but ever since leaving Konigstuhl, I had been surrounded by folk with such tough immune systems that they barely even coughed. It had been an age since the last time I found myself in this position.

My first new connection after leaving my home had been a methuselah, who couldn’t die of natural causes in the first place. Then I had met Mika, who’d come from a place where folks made their kids skinny-dip in icy rivers to build up their tolerance practically as soon as they were old enough to walk; ignoring the minor blip that had occurred after our nightmare in the ichor maze, they were tough as hell. Cecilia was a vampire—no explanation needed there. As for Elisa, after her alfish colors had come to the surface, she had remained in good health.

“I thought docs didn’t approve of fruits ’cause they make ya chilly, no?” Schnee replied. “And don’t people usually give flowers or booze?”

The complete dearth of hospital visits in this life hadn't given me any chance to realize that giving fruit to a sick person was a cultural holdover from my past life in Japan. Schnee's words brought back faint memories from previous conversations where people had mentioned that in the Empire people usually gifted flowers. They were easy to order and dispose of, and above all were universally beloved for capturing the visitor's feelings for the recipient. How could I forget that it was the safest choice in the book? As for gifts of alcohol, purportedly a stiff, hot drink helped fend off your average cold; naturally, that made that sort of thing a popular gift for folks in recovery. That said, I doubted it'd do much good for Schnee's perforated guts.

Ugh, melons are only available in the winter in the Empire, so I had to work my ass off to get this watermelon. Who knows how far it had to travel to reach Marsheim?

"But thank ya all the same. It'd be a cryin' shame not to enjoy an eastern delight."

"Please do. It's come a long way, so it should be redder and sweeter than the stuff grown here."

"Lucky me. But I ain't sure how long I've been asleep..."

"The doctor said you're recovering incredibly quickly. It was only yesterday that your life was in danger, you know? At any rate, you're in the clear to indulge a bit."

Schnee's narrowed eyes suddenly widened in surprise. Bubastisians had decidedly un menschlike eyes and eyelids; shock showed very differently on their faces. This trait was useful in Schnee's line of work as a master of disguise.

"Now that's somethin'... I'd chalked myself up as a goner. Done wrote off survivin' when I caught that shiv to the stomach, y'know? What with it being lathered up with all that lovely poison and such."

Being an informant wasn't simply about handing out any scrap of rumor that passed within range. Schnee had thrown herself headlong into all manner of hazards to life and limb to verify every last item of interest with her own eyes before her intel ever found its way to us. She knew best just how dreadful the wound was. And in truth it was a terrible one—the knife had struck deep and

been twisted out.

Even if Schnee had survived after our battle with the assassins, she would have died moments later if there hadn't been a healer present to take care of her. Whether from internal bleeding or infection from her own cross-contaminating humors, she would have eventually kicked the bucket in two or three days. Such was the extent of her wound.

"It looks like our trusty healer's medicine worked," I said. "A normal doctor would have given you up for good."

Kaya's medicine, created thanks to Siegfried's battlefield trauma and her paranoia about his safety, had worked wonders on the bubastisian's otherwise fatal injury. The slime-like algae had affixed itself to the internal wounds as it consumed any lost blood and fecal matter. It digested these into nutrients that could be reabsorbed by the body while simultaneously helping to repair the wounds. It was truly a marvel of modern medicine.

Kaya had told me that it wasn't yet able to deal with more complicated organs like the heart or lungs, but it was undeniable that it had vastly sped up Schnee's recovery.

"Now ain't that somethin'. I gotta thank the lady in person."

"Please do. She's had a lot on her mind of late, so I'm sure your kind words would cheer her up to no end."

Lately Kaya fell into the occasional deep pensive moment. It always started the same way; she'd be perusing the potions I'd helped her develop, and she'd get this look on her face—not quite *hateful*, but certainly full of distaste. I wasn't quite sure what was the matter—I'd asked Siegfried, but he looked at me like I was the dumbest person alive—but at any rate I needed to let her know that this latest concoction was a resounding success before Schnee started moving about.

Kaya's orders were to make sure that Schnee drank two pitchers of water over the course of the day—spread out, of course, not all at once—and to get thirty minutes of daylight each day too. On this latter point, she'd been quite firm with me that Schnee ought to *especially* expose the affected area.

“Huh? The ol’ sun’s gonna fix me up?” Schnee said, evidently confused.

“Simply put, yes. I suppose it would be faster for you to see for yourself.”

I turned away, as any good gentleman should, and asked her to pull up her shirt without touching the wound.

In the next moment she started making a strange, almost choking noise. I had been pretty freaked out when I saw the algae crawl into her, so her own surprise was a given, really. After all, anyone would be grossed out at seeing a green mold-like substance lining the wound, standing out horrendously against their snow-white fur.

“Mraaaaagh!”

Schnee’s stifled sounds exploded into a scream. It seemed even our talented informant couldn’t bear seeing her body’s impression of a neglected swimming pool. I had placed my hands on my ears in anticipation of this, but I still considered asking Kaya for some ear drops later—a cat’s scream powered by mensch-scale lungs is a brutal thing to endure.

[Tips] Kaya’s decay-inhibiting algae concoction was created out of a fear that her friend Dirk could die from internal bleeding and decay after receiving a deadly gut wound. Kaya’s various potions have prevented deaths among the members of the Fellowship of the Blade and have allowed them to return to battle quickly, even after being gravely wounded.

“Whew... Now *that* made me jump outta my skin. I thought I slept so long I was startin’ to grow spots!”

Schnee took a bite of the freshly cut watermelon. It sounded like I’d gotten lucky and found a juicy one for her.

I hadn’t cut it into crescent-shaped slices, as her mouth was hugely different from a mensch’s; I’d opted instead for easy-to-bite squares of the stuff. *If you’re going to bring fruit, then it’s your responsibility to make sure it can be eaten too*, I thought.

“Mold doesn’t like to settle on the living,” I said. “Ah, although athlete’s foot

is a type of mold...”

“Never had to deal with it. It’s fleas that get my fur a-twitchin’...”

It had taken a little while to calm Schnee down from her little mental implosion. I couldn’t blame her, really. I had faint memories of a friend in my old world who had gotten involved in a traffic accident. Apparently they’d clamped the wound shut with what was nothing more than a medical-grade stapler. I think I’d scream if I was treated like a cheaply bound notebook.

“Well, gotta be thankful I still got my life. I’ve accepted what’s goin’ on, don’t worry.”

“Great. Although Kaya said to refrain from heavy exercise, alcohol, and baths for a month.”

“Oof, half a season without movin’ is gonna be tricky. I’ll be fine on the bathin’ front, though.”

The latter part of this sentence reminded me once of again in the gulf in our day-to-day realities as different species. Unlike werewolves or gnolls, when bubastisians groomed, their saliva could mask their scent. Not only that, they hardly sweat, so they didn’t *need* the baths like I did. *I wonder how they regulate their body temperature?* I thought.

It was probably a pain for them to dry themselves once they got soaked, though. Us mensch could towel our heads dry with minimal complaint, but furred folks probably had a *much* harder time of it.

“Well, this will be the last bit of intel you’ll be gettin’ from me. For a while at least.”

I had bitten my tongue on bringing up the topic of intel, given that our informant was quite literally in her sickbed, but Schnee brought up the matter herself. In the next moment, she *placed her hand into her mouth*. With that unique sound that cats make when they’re hawking up a furball, Schnee spat something out into the bucket by her bed where they kept the water to wash her face in the mornings.

“Wh-What’s going on?!” I could only say.

“My last and most secret hiding place, Goldilocks Erich. Li’l trick of the trade, ya might say.”

After a few pained coughs, Schnee wiped her mouth and gave me a devilish smirk.

What she had produced was a wad of oiled paper. Something was wrapped inside, most likely to protect it from her stomach acid. I was hardly *unfamiliar* with the idea of a courier concealing a vital package in their stomach (looking back, there were *much worse options* I hadn’t considered at the time), and this was arguably the most natural way to retrieve it, but it was still, on its face, *deeply icky* to me—and it showed.

It must have taken quite some practice to swallow something quite that big. My body would probably have tapped out if I even tried to swallow something as small as a key, so this was a tactic that you couldn’t whip out on a whim.

The thing was about the size of a business card, albeit a measure thicker. I was impressed that Schnee had managed just to fit it in her throat.

“So, what is it?” I asked.

“Passes for checkpoints. Have a gander.”

The oiled paper had been wrapped almost perfectly, because the sheets of paper inside them were completely dry and legible. As she had said, these were passes issued by nobles that would allow the bearer free movement through the various checkpoints here in the west. Not only that, most didn’t have expiration dates and were inscribed with a line that *forbade* anyone from inspecting them on the spot. These were the highest grade of pass you could carry, and they couldn’t be issued at all without Margrave Marsheim’s ratification. They were doubly warded against forgery with magic and miracles. These were the real deal.

“Viscount Besigheim, Baron Maulbronn, Baron Wiesache...” I read aloud.

The names of the nobles who had issued these passes were all former local strongarms who had turned to the Imperial side or those who were still sitting on the fence. Baron Wiesache in particular had once had the rank of king before he had been subsumed by the Empire. He was a methuselah who had lived

through the troublesome era during the Empire's early days in Ende Erde and still maintained his own personal sphere of influence.

"Hmm, I recognize the nobles' names, but I haven't really heard of any of these caravans," I went on. "I suppose they're rather small—maybe they only serve a single family?"

My grip on the passes grew tighter as the realization hit me that these might be crucial clues in finding out how Kykeon was being smuggled into Marsheim.

My thoughts were put on pause as I felt a soft touch on my nose, as if someone were hitting the off switch on my brain. The person who had supplied this information must have read my expression.

"Cool your jets, Erich. Lettin' your thoughts run away with ya can lead you straight into a trap."

"R-Right..."

"Now, it was true that the merchants carryin' these passes also had Kykeon in their stock. Some were even given daggers with the respective family crest on 'em."

It was obvious now that Schnee had said it. The local lords had done awful things here in Marsheim, and I had let my preconceptions of them get ahead of me. I had even colored these more morally gray folk with the same brush. The fact of the matter was that the Baldur Clan's intel on these bigwigs acting up was nothing more than hearsay. Although you could make some leaps in logic using these slips, there was no *guaranteed* proof that these three nobles had done anything wrong. Letting my emotions get ahead of me like this—I might as well have hitched myself up with puppet strings and handed the free ends over to the enemy.

"But the folk transportin' this stuff have been sneaky with how they're hidin' the drug," Schnee went on. "It ain't in such easy to find places. Plus there ain't proof that these passes have actually been used."

"What do you mean?"

"If someone with this danglin' off of 'em passes through a checkpoint, it's gonna get logged, no matter what. I did a li'l bit of diggin'—y'know, checkin' the

merchants' diaries, the logbooks of the checkpoints—and turned up nothin'. Even in Marsheim's own entry logs. There wasn't any proof that they were used. Whoever was carryin' 'em paid the toll fair and square."

Schnee reeled off all this stuff as if it were nothing; was she really unaware of how incredible she had been?

Mercantile families with wandering tradesmen often allowed their hires to live with them alongside two or three personal guards. These hired hands worked with utmost secrecy, using magic or miracles to stay on guard and make sure their employer's secrets remained their own.

Yet Schnee had managed to infiltrate a number of these groups *and* get information from the checkpoints, which were all heavily guarded. How on earth had she managed it?

This was what made PCs who were information specialists terrifying. With a properly busted spread of bonuses to the usual selection of investigative skills, they could practically pluck key information out of thin air, leaving the rest of their party scratching their heads. For these superhumans, you would be more inclined to believe they'd just convinced the GM to hand off all their prep notes rather than pulling off any of the actual schemes they'd engineered.

"Not only that," Schnee continued, "the way Kykeon and these slips were hidden was almost too obvious, y'know? Almost as if they wanted someone to sniff it out. It's fishy."

"But the drugs are meant to be sold. I know they would want to hide the passes extra carefully, but it seems weird to keep the drugs super hidden..."

"Agreed. If it's hidden too well, then it'll make business tricky. 'Specially with those slips of Kykeon. You'd expect these dealers to use more easily accessible methods."

You could hide things in hidden pockets of your clothes, under secret compartments in your bag, or even in other products and put them in storage. However, although these would hide your product, it would be hard to get at it quickly and easily.

"Plus, this is just speakin' on what I've seen, but folk who deal in shady stuff

like this don't keep it on themselves. Right?"

"Very true."

The Baldur Clan's mansion was a veritable den of sin—practically wall-to-wall with Nanna's minions getting absolutely blasted on her junk, twenty-four seven—but Nanna was always changing up her stock to toe the line with the letter of the law, if not the spirit, not unlike how the synthetic cannabinoid trade worked on Earth. Even if the authorities got involved, they'd never be able to make a substantive accusation stick. I doubted that any documents or contracts pinning them to anything shady were even hidden in their hideout.

This was the reason some shady clans had their own properties in more rustic areas. No matter how many higher-ups came sniffing around—as long as an independent bureaucrat with a real passion for justice and doing things by the book didn't show up, that was—then the clan members could slip through the net on technicality after technicality.

Taking this into account, only an idiot would put their own stock in their own home and merchants' caravans. That, or...

"Do you think these nobles are trying to set someone up?" I said.

"I thought that was most likely, yeah."

"You 'thought' it was?"

Schnee's pink nose and white whiskers began to twitch—she was laughing.

"Who d'ya think these clothes belong to?" she said, pointing to her bloodied clothes hanging on the wall.

"It's a maid uniform; it could be from anywhere, really."

We had decided that it would be bad form to dispose of an informant's clothes when her blood was splattered upon them, not to speak of the possibility of notes and such hidden in the seams, and so we had left them here after removing them from her.

The clothes in question were a long, black dress, a white sleeved apron, and white cuffs. Simply put, the sort of maid clothes you would have seen in the England of my previous world a hundred or so years back.

“The laundry maids at Baron Wiesache’s villa in Marsheim wear that uniform specifically,” Schnee said.

“You infiltrated a baron’s manor?!”

I couldn’t help but stand up in surprise. What was she doing? A laundry maid was the lowest position among a family’s servants, but there was a huge difference in working for some country lord versus a noble. Their servants were almost always hired from within their own territory! Even if he had scouted for useful workers from Marsheim, she would have needed a guarantor. This wasn’t the sort of place where you could put on a disguise and waltz in without any issue.

“Let’s call it...a woman’s secret. A gal’s gotta earn her dough.”

“That’s well and good, but you infiltrated quite the place...”

I couldn’t think up one decent strategy to sneak into a *noble house* without being found out. Even if the head of the household didn’t conduct a personal interview, they would get their butler or the head maid to screen anyone suspicious. Not only that, the servant world inside a household was small. Someone would notice a new face. Sure, it *might* have seemed fine from afar, but she would have needed to skulk around the entire manor for decent intel...

“From what I dug up, it looks like Baron Wiesache was moments from bein’ falsely accused,” Schnee said, returning to business. “Maybe it’s ’cause he’s a methuselah, but the good baron hates writin’. He didn’t have a diary. Luckily for him, his mensch butler is quite the meticulous scribe.”

“You didn’t just sneak in; you managed to have a peep at the most important servant’s diary?”

“Not just a peep. I got the copies in my sleeve up there,” Schnee said, pointing at her maid outfit.

I removed the sleeve as ordered—in this age, sleeves could be removed and discarded as needed—and poked around the seams until I found a little piece of paper hidden in between them. It was quite craftily hidden—the sort of thing you wouldn’t find unless you already knew where to look for it.

“Anyway, the butler was pretty scrupulous. He made daily records on any

docs that had been stamped. And, wouldja believe it, there was *nothin'* on our officially sanctioned checkpoint passes.”

“Did Baron Wiesache’s butler have the stamp of approval?”

“Yeah, he did. But it’s pretty unlikely that he pilfered it for his own ends.”

It was evident that Schnee had done some deep digging right into the baron’s office. How on earth had she managed it? The only way I could think of was more of a barbarian’s approach—silence everyone inside through brute force and simply label it as covert after the fact. More importantly, I was honestly shocked that a noble would give their household’s stamp of approval to their butler.

“I got a copy of the stamp. Have a look-see in the left sleeve.”

I checked the other sleeve to find copied notes with the baron’s seal on them. I was impressed yet again—the copies had just enough ink to bear a perfectly clear facsimile of the seal.

I held one of them up to the one on the checkpoint pass, and after a little comparison concluded that they were perfect copies of one another. Size, design, imperfections on the seal—each matched to a tee. The conclusion to be drawn was that these fake documents had been created and then writ off with the original stamp, all without the baron noticing.

“As for Viscount Besigheim, he’s pretty darn scatterbrained.”

“Yeah, I’ve not heard the *best* things about him,” I said.

Viscount Besigheim was still young for a mensch—was still in his thirties—and if you were feeling cruel, the familiar expression “idiot son” would fit him perfectly. The previous Viscount Besigheim died at a young age after a fatal equestrian accident, and so the younger Besigheim had taken over the family. If Besigheim senior had been alive and well, I was almost certain he never would have given up his position to his son.

According to the rumors, his two younger brothers—who had decided to become subjects of the state and were now Imperial knights—were far, far more suitable candidates to run the family.

Viscount Besigheim's reputation had even reached adventuring circles. He had made several stupid requests, one of which was a terribly dangerous endeavor to directly procure some gin from the northern isles. Why would the man spend downright treasonous sums to round up adventurers foolish enough to play errand boy for him, you ask? Well, he had women to impress, you see.

It didn't matter if the pay was good; the northern sea was a dangerous territory ruled by pirates. While it might have been true that adventurers didn't have to pay as much in customs fees—if you were amber-orange or above, that was—no one wanted to waste half an entire year on a gussied-up milk run.

“Now, back to Baron Wiesache,” Schnee said. “He is, for better or worse, an honest man. Before the Empire came he was a king, y'know, despite bein' a methuselah.”

“So basically, although the viscount might be swayed by the allure of money, that seems less likely with the baron, huh.”

“Yeah. He ain't the kinda person to brazenly betray Margrave Marsheim, if ya ask me. If he *were* going to, he wouldn't act all sneaky like this—he'd bring his men and encircle the margrave's manor himself. If ya ask me, he's got that barbarian spirit right down to his bones.”

The only methuselaha I knew were Lady Agrippina and Marquis Donnersmarck, which made it difficult for me to conjure a mental image of Baron Wiesache. In the days before the Empire, he had been an honest but boorish warrior-king of a lesser kingdom. I wasn't sure what reasons he had for acquiescing to the Empire's demands and receiving the title of baron, but it was clear to me that he wasn't nearly enough of a sneak to engineer a plan as roundabout as the Kykeon crisis if he wanted to tear down Marsheim.

“This would suggest that we're looking at a political attack made to *look* like internal trouble,” I said.

“Right. The truths I've gleaned would point to that.”

That would mean that the drugs brought in by the caravans and the passes required to do so were nothing more than a bluff—they weren't the actual problem here.

Margrave Marsheim was suffering from a personnel problem so bad that he had tried to press-gang me—I had Lady Agrippina’s word on that—so the margrave’s enemies had plotted to worsen the situation by forcing the margrave to turn on one of his most powerful warriors.

Countless nations had come to ruin thanks to such methods. I would say that Baron Wiesache wasn’t quite on the same level as Yuan Chonghuan of the Ming dynasty, but he was an important playing piece and an overall boon to his region, in addition to being one of a handful of keystone players whose involvement kept Marsheim from spiraling into war. The anti-Rhinian local lords would be overjoyed if he’d been brought down by an oversight on the margrave’s part.

The plan would work even if Margrave Marsheim himself wasn’t fooled. If this false scandal came to light, then powerful nobles would come out of the woodwork demanding the former enemy of the Empire deserved nothing less than a swift death, and the external pressure would force the margrave’s hand. They would claim that it was for the greater good, but they would secretly be focusing on their own political gains.

If Baron Wiesache went down without a fight, then that would be great. If he lived up to his reputation as a powerful, easy to anger former local lord and instigated a revolt, then that would be even *better*. The seditionists would love to see one of the Empire’s favorite playing pieces get wiped out and stir up chaos in the region along with it.

One revolt wouldn’t be enough to topple the Empire’s hegemony, but they could chip away at the base through this internal attack. This required clever-minded scheming and patience. It was a despicable tactic, not least because it was *maddening* to respond to. It was difficult for us small-time adventurers to resolve a political situation that demanded more precise and civil means than a few well-placed sword strokes.

“They done found me out not too long after I put it all together,” Schnee said.

“Were you still undercover at the manor?”

“Nope. Not when I came to my theory, at least. But that’s when those five assassins came knockin’. It was like the Sun God or someone was sayin’ ta me:

‘Hey, your theory’s bang on the money!’ Problem with me is that I can’t hide what I’m thinkin’,” Schnee said with a cheeky smile. In all honesty, I couldn’t read her expression at all. She went on, “This’s only a hunch, but I bet they *meant* for somebody with both halves of their brain to rub together to figure out the first layer of the plot. The culprits here are layin’ bait so that the Empire can rush to conclusions and stab itself in the side.”

“Aha. But a sneaky cat stole their wurst before it could be smoked.”

It was well and good to use some shrimp to try and catch some sea bream, but you had to be aware that you could be pulled into the ocean if you weren’t careful. All the better that we’d brought along a little cat eager to play with the fishing line and unhook the bait. They had cottoned onto their missing fake evidence and had sent four—no, five, if we include the one who threw that Kykeon bomb at me—to retrieve the counterfeited material.

Our informant had found a vital piece of the puzzle, but I had no notion of where it went in the bigger picture. There was an answer to this thing, but if we had lost her, then it might have taken forever for us to reach the solution. Blessedly, we’d managed to keep a lifelong student of human skullduggery in one piece and thinking straight enough to do all the heavy thinking for us. It felt like we’d been fighting smoke before, but now I felt like we had a little bit of a handle on things.

“Kykeon wasn’t spread to lobotomize the Marsheim’s public...” I said. “It’s meant to turn the margrave against his own best assets among the gentry.”

“Yep, the difference is in the details. It wouldn’t be great to turn Ende Erde into a drugged-up, lawless land, but that ain’t enough to knock the margrave from his position.”

It was just like ehrengarde. If you wanted to take down the emperor, who was stuck in the corner but protected by guardsmen and castles, then your opener hinged on eliminating the lesser pieces. It wasn’t like shogi, where you gained enemy pieces after beating them; this was much closer to real life. You had one target, and you had to work to get to it.

That left us with a number of options.

“I doubt those three names were the only ones being targeted, were they?” I

said.

“Prob’ly not, no. I didn’t have enough time to sniff about that much, but I’d bet that some other nobles are bein’ looked into as well. I bet they wanna topple as many houses as they can. Plus, y’know what they say, if ya go back six generations, the whole peerage is just one big family.”

There was no rule that said one piece of evidence had one perpetrator behind it. This was no mere streetside stabbing. This whole scheme relied on an elaborate causal chain—drug smuggling could be linked to other misdeeds, and Margrave Marsheim’s people could be removed from the board one by one.

Once you had eliminated those close to the margrave, then you were left with the fence sitters, the true bureaucrats, who would cut off their noses to spite their faces. All that you had to do was rile them up, and support for the margrave would be left in tatters.

The whole plan fit together beautifully, and that drove me up a *wall*. The Trialist Empire of Rhine was a great five-century-old ash tree of a nation—vast, sheltering, and deeply rooted. Yet here these people were, coaxing the roots into *strangling one another*.

“I’d bet that Baron Maulbronn is prob’ly in the most danger at the moment. His household ain’t much to write home about, but he’s well-liked among the pro-Imperial local lords. He’s always chattin’ away at social events—makes him a prime target for folks lookin’ to take advantage.”

After infiltrating Baron Wiesache’s manor and securing our intel, Schnee had intended to go undercover at Baron Maulbronn’s manor next, but had met with the assassins before she’d had the chance.

“Very well. Leave the rest to us.”

“Um, I’m doin’ this for myself, y’know? I don’t remember anyone taskin’ me with this.”

From between Schnee’s narrowed eyelids, I could feel her golden gaze pierce right into me. The look seemed to suggest that if she stared hard enough, she might lay bare my true intentions.

I had nothing to hide. I had decided to become an adventurer in Marsheim, so

there were no lies I needed to tell.

I gave Schnee a faint smile, and she tossed her head back on her pillow.

“Jeez... This town really does got its fair share of strange folk... I keep wonderin’ when the whole thing’s gonna come down like a house of matchsticks, but then another weirdo comes along to prop it up.”

“We’re just two weirdos helping each other out, Schnee.”

Everyone preferred a clean home; you could sleep easier at night that way.

I did some mental math. Unfortunately our little adventuring unit needed funds, so I racked my brains trying to pin down who would benefit from some well-paid good deeds.

[Tips] It is said that Imperial families are all related if you go back six generations. The family tree has been made even more complex due to illegitimate children, forged family lineages, and untold secrets to smooth along inheritance.

Much like how companies in Erich’s old world would prepare accommodation for employees on business trips, the nobles of the Empire of Rhine often kept separate manors near their favorite stomping grounds. It wasn’t rare for some of the more renowned families to have upward of ten manors, when you counted the health resorts.

Just as the nobles in and around Berylin had manors in the capital, those of Ende Erde—aside from the poorest of them—had their own permanent residences in Marsheim to aid in overseeing their territory.

“What a tangle we find ourselves in yet again,” Margit said to herself. She was currently in a manor of Baron Maulbronn’s, located in a quiet bit of northern Marsheim. To be precise, she was in the manor’s attic, among the dust and cobwebs.

Schnee was still recovering from her near-fatal wound, and so Erich had taken it upon himself to continue the investigation. Margit had only agreed to go undercover like this because Erich had bowed his head and pleaded for her

help.

Margit enjoyed feeling needed and didn't particularly mind a tight, filthy squeeze. After all, she was a hunter. If the hunt called for it, part of her remit was crawling into a bear's cave with only a few poison-tipped arrows to her name. She wouldn't blink in the face of some dust, cobwebs, or scuttling rats and cockroaches.

The one thing that sat at the back of her mind was the context of this whole expedition. She had come to the Empire's western reaches with the man she loved to become an adventurer, yet here she was playing burglar in a noble manor. Of course, the logic wasn't lost on her. Margit knew that the fiends who sought to bring Marsheim to its knees with Kykeon were slowly enclosing their tentacles around Baron Maulbronn, so they needed to search his house before the false accusations against him came to light.

All the same, she wondered: *Is this still adventuring?*

It was obvious to all that Goldilocks's gung-ho "whatever it takes" attitude was *not* normal. Any regular person who had received a formal education would label him as a patently obvious loon; he was plainly blessed and cursed with strange cares of no discernible origin. Only Erich knew of the past he held, of the years spent poring over rulebooks which had warped his very brain; of the various worlds he had enjoyed at the table which had changed his core value system.

Erich wasn't quite foolish enough to view the world he lived in as a tabletop game, but he did fall into the trap of viewing himself as a PC. If something was interesting or would prove suitable to his purposes, then he'd gladly take on the most heterodox or roundabout path that would get him there, if it was "optimal."

That was why normal people—*sensible* people—would never choose to follow, even if they were aware of their existence, the most efficient strategies he concocted. A regular person wouldn't send their partner on a covert mission into a baron's manor. It was true that Margit had the abilities for the job, they had worked out a way to communicate secretly, and they had secured blueprints of the manor, but all the same such decisions weren't *normal*.

Rhinian law was designed to punish theft severely. Steal ten drachmae and you would find yourself without a head. There was no way that Erich, who had personally worked under a noble, didn't know the dangers and the consequences of sneaking into such a place.

But justice was on Erich's side; this wasn't mere theft, it was protection. After all, the punishment for revolt was death. Not a swift death, however, but a long, drawn-out display for everyone to see. The menace known as the Infernal Knight had only recently received a similar punishment in Adrian Imperial Plaza; everyone in Marsheim knew how the law handled traitors.

In the end, this was a mission of *mercy* on Erich and Margit's part. An innocent man could never deserve such a fate.

"Um... This is Kaufmann. Ubermut, do you copy?" Margit said.

"This is Ubermut. I hear you, Kaufmann. Over," Erich replied.

The pair were talking through Voice Transmission necklaces. For the sake of anonymity, they were using code names. Erich's own sense of aesthetics had led him to choose the German phonetic alphabet.

Goldilocks had positioned himself in the tower of a lightly guarded house located diagonally across from Baron Maulbronn's manor. He was monitoring the corridor near the room that Margit was heading for through a spyglass.

He had come to support his partner, of course, but Erich's magical know-how was vital here. Baron Maulbronn's family weren't of the highest renown, but its history stretched back to the days when the local lords still had power. The manor didn't have advanced barriers and the like, but it had an alarm system for detecting intruders. In addition, there was a system that would detect when magic was used on the premises.

To combat this, Erich had devised a communication system with Voice Transmission that utilized Margit's ultrafine web. By channeling their voices along it, he was able to drastically reduce the spell's mana signature, thus keeping them undetected. The scout would work her way through the building, while Erich would warn her of any traps that she could not spot. This was vital to the plan's success.

“The night watch are all asleep while standing up,” Margit said. “I suppose that’s to be expected of such a quiet household. There’s one wandering guard who comes once every two hours—on the dot. He just passed, so he won’t be back for a while.”

It was shortly before dawn. Margit had infiltrated the manor when the night was at its darkest...or she *would* have—it’d seemed wisest. Erich had instead suggested that she enter during dusk, when they would be busy with servants starting or leaving their shift. Both of these adventurers had forgone the bathroom and food for a good third of the day.

“Lucky us. Looks like Nordpol’s information was on the money,” Erich said.

These code names would only be used for this mission: Margit was Kaufmann, Erich was Ubermut, and their informant was Nordpol. The names had been chosen so that there would be no way to link them back to the real people. It made sense to Margit, but she thought that it was a bit overkill. Infiltrating the manor was never going to be the easiest task, but were all the smoke and mirrors really necessary?

“Very well, I shall invite myself down. Let me know if you see anyone.”

“Of course. I’ll be watching. Over and out.”

Margit wanted to rake Erich over the coals for a wealth of reasons, but her love for him stifled these emotions. She silently crawled through the attic space and made her way to the office, neatly picking her way around the wire and bell traps. It was as well guarded as the baron’s private chambers, but it was almost certain that the inside would be empty. Baron Maulbronn was taking part in a nighttime party exclusively for nobles in Ende Erde with jurisdictions around the Mauser River. He would be back by noon at the earliest, barring a truly masterful stroke of bad luck.

The Fellowship of the Blade was monitoring the party closely, and so a message would come immediately if the baron decided to come home early for whatever reason. Margit was capable enough to exfiltrate herself in the interim.

Margit squeezed herself into an access hole hidden behind the wallpaper. It was the sort of hidey-hole that no mensch could have exploited, but it was still a bit cramped by her standards—unlike a mensch, an arachne’s widest point

was not her shoulders, but her lower body. An arachne's spidery lower half was made up of a combination of an endoskeleton and exoskeleton containing her hydraulic muscles and digestive organs. Margit could never have managed the squeeze, if not for a little trick of her own.

"I'd rather not get in the habit of this—it's such a *cheap* tactic—but it looks like I haven't much choice..." she mumbled to herself.

An arachne's legs were completely unlike those of mensch too. There was a slight depression at the base of each joint, with a membrane to allow for smooth movement. There were also various hinges and pivots within, allowing for a shockingly wide range of motility.

In short, she could collapse and displace certain joints to compact her profile. Some joints could be popped back in, and some could not—it was vital to know which were which. Even though arachne were tougher than mensch in ways, this was a dangerous technique. It was not to be undertaken without careful forethought. Margit bit down on a cloth and, without hesitation, popped out some of her leg joints.

She kept silent, but her straining face showed the exertion required. Now that she was a bit less horizontally challenged, she slipped through the access hole with ease.

"I wondered if it would ever be of any use, but here we are..."

This advanced technique had been passed down by Margit's mother, Corale, who had once been an adventurer herself. Corale had explained that if you got caught and tied up, this was the easiest way of escaping if you didn't have any tools. Corale had drilled into Margit the best way to dislocate her joints—both the human parts and the spider parts.

A young Margit had sobbed to herself on rainy days when the cold weather made her joints ache, cursing her mother for teaching her things that would never help in a hunt, so it was an odd feeling to see them finally come in handy.

"Now then, back to the hunt..."

Margit made sure her joints were all working without issue before heading to the baron's desk. Because Baron Maulbronn chiefly resided in Marsheim, his

desk was cleaned to an elegant sheen. Handwritten notes and balled pieces of paper told that he had used the desk shortly before departing.

Margit grabbed a small but eye-catching statuette—perhaps an old hero from the days before the Empire—and moved it from the left side of the desk to the right. Next she went to the three ink pots and moved the lid of the center one to the left, and then the right one to the center. Finally, she located the pen pot and pushed back the right of the two quills inside. As it slid into place, she heard a *click*.

It was a magical lock. Nobles used them to hide their most valuable documents; one wrong move would result in an alarm going off. Schnee had dug up the key causal sequence, but merely said it was a “gal’s secret” when questioned about how she’d figured it out. There was no riddle, no hint lying in wait somewhere in the room—it was a secret that only the baron knew. As Margit pulled out a leather case from her sleeve, she inwardly praised Schnee’s unfathomable talent.

Margit’s leather case was tightly bound with string to secure the tools inside. They were a collection of metal rods of various sizes and elaborate heads—her lockpicks, and not your everyday set either. The law forbade anyone but a licensed professional from owning anything of the kind; Margit only had a set because Corale had gifted them to her during that cold winter when she decided to leave Marsheim with Erich.

Corale’s talents as a scout went beyond just her small frame and agility. She had honed her lockpicking talents of her own accord so that her party would never suffer when they encountered doors or treasure chests in ancient ruins and the like.

“The keyhole is in the old style but...yes, the inner mechanism is cylindrical. A magical lock and then a physical one... The baron has quite the deep purse.”

Margit had taken a page from her mother’s book and honed her own lockpicking abilities—first with bought cheap training locks or disused locks scavenged from the scrap heap. She’d come a long way since.

The keyhole was old-fashioned—looking like a circle atop a trapezium—but inside was an advanced locking mechanism. It was a little bit of a pain, but she

set to work quickly and placed a few of her lockpicks inside. The cylinder lock had only come into fashion a few dozen years ago. A number of pins went through a two-layered cylinder, which all had to be raised to a certain height before the inner cylinder could turn and unlock the lock. The keys such newfangled locks took were jagged, saw-toothed affairs precisely machined to lift the pins and turn the cylinder *just so*.

However, once you knew how it worked, all it took was a little careful trial and error to crack it open. If the lock utilized a magical randomly shape-changing alloy, or if it responded to blood or certain mana waves, Margit would have been stuck, but it was well within her skill set as a hunter to lithely uncover the lock's sweet spots.

“That’s one down...”

In the space of twenty breaths, Margit unlocked the top drawer of the three-tier desk drawers. It might have been quick for a layperson, but a pro could have done it in a faint five eyeblinks. Disappointed with her still as of yet immature skill, Margit carefully placed her hand upon the drawer.

“No paint on the handle... No hair-or dust-activated traps...”

Some paranoid people put in extra measures on top of locks, such as old-fashioned alarm systems that would send out an alert if someone touched their belongings without permission. Fortunately Baron Maulbronn had placed his faith in the double locking system, and so hadn't worked any childish tricks on the drawer.

“This is Kaufmann. Are you still awake, Ubermut?”

“This is Ubermut. Of course I am. In fact, I was admiring the sleeping guard's face. It's quite an amusing sight.”

“Good. I've found our first item.”

The top drawer of the desk contained Baron Maulbronn's diary. It was a lavish thing with a sheepskin cover that suggested it was to be used for a long time. It was highly likely that the baron had taken up the diary so that he might leave it to future generations. In other words, it was a potent source of information.

Life was fragile; no one knew when death might come on swift wings for

them. It was impossible to relay everything with spoken words alone, and so many nobles kept a journal of their daily activities and who they met. A diary was more than a mere memory aid—it could, in the right hands, prove a *deadly arsenal* of unexploded social bombs for their children and grandchildren.

“He’s meticulous, but his handwriting is...rather unique. I suppose that makes sense, considering his position.”

“How many records?”

“He’s got one book for each year. Each starts at the beginning of the year too.”

Although the baron’s handwriting was *disciplined*, it looked like the person who had taught him either had an utterly unique artistic sense or was straight up untalented. It was totally unlike the flowing cursive that the Imperial nobility favored. It wasn’t quite so bad that any recipient of a letter of his would think that they were being looked down upon, but they might snicker and consider him a country bumpkin.

All the same, the content covered the main details of his days efficiently enough. The diary began with Margrave Marsheim’s new year’s party.

“That’s perfect,” Erich said. “Some people can fill up one of those things in a month and so would send them back to their primary residence for storage, so it’s lucky for us that they’re all here and concise. And from the start of the year too! Could you make some copies from spring onward?”

“Of course.”

Margit drew out a few slips of paper from her knapsack, hidden under her cloak. At first glance it didn’t look like anything out of the ordinary—just simple run-of-the-mill stationery. However, Margit wasn’t going to copy out the baron’s diary by hand. It would take two whole hours to copy even a fifth of what they needed.

“Now then, I place it with the smooth side facing up...”

Margit laid the copy paper atop the first spring entry and let it rest for a few seconds. When she peeled it off, it revealed a perfect facsimile of the text underneath.

This was all Kaya's handiwork. The talented herbalist had coated the paper in a special concoction that changed color in reaction to ink. All you had to do was place it on whatever you wanted copied, and it would be transferred over. Every quirk of the original writer—from content to penmanship—would be meticulously preserved.

After silently and carefully copying the necessary pages, Margit returned the diary to its original location and locked the drawer once more.

"Ubermut, do you copy? This is Kaufmann. I've finished with the diary. Is it safe to proceed to phase two?"

"This is Ubermut. It's quiet out here. I can see some smoke from the hearth coming out the chimney, but I expect they're preparing the servants' meals."

"Would you mind checking once more for me? I can sense if anyone comes down the corridor whether or not I'm occupied, but it won't do us any harm to be sure."

"Roger that. I'll let you know if it's anything concerning."

Margit needed to check in with Erich before starting on the next part of her job. Dawn was close. Soon the servants would begin to wake and start their duties. Cleaning was done in the early morning and the afternoon, when the master of the house was absent, but it was cooking that marked the start of the day. You could work out what the day had to offer by what they cooked, with a more epicurean spread indicating the arrival of an important guest.

"This Ubermut. They have prepared wurst, black bread, and cheese for breakfast. These are all precooked. They don't seem to have any fowl prepared for lunch either."

"This is Kaufmann. Roger that. It seems like we should be quite all right, then. I'll carry on."

"Take care."

The spread was the usual fare for servants. Unlike Imperials, the long-term residents of Ende Erde didn't like porridge, preferring bread instead. The fact that it was only black bread today meant that the pair's intel that the baron wouldn't be back until later was on the money.

“I’ve opened the second drawer. It’s full of letters. Mostly from big names in Ende Erde, but some are from the south and even from abroad. Again his meticulousness is showing—he’s organized them into separate boxes.”

“Okay, we’ve got some time. Start with the ones from Marsheim nobles. If your ring starts to vibrate, that’s a sign to not open the letter.”

“Yes, I remember. Being a noble comes with its own share of problems, it seems.”

Most formulae to prevent peeping were weaved into wax seals, which would only activate once the seal was broken. There were times when people wished to hold on to letters for safekeeping and they would recast the spell to protect it once more; you had to be careful if you were rifling through someone else’s inbox. Depending on their content, letters had the power to end lives. If someone chose to keep an important letter instead of burning it, then it was likely it was sufficiently protected.

But Erich’s specially crafted magic-detecting ring didn’t react even once. Erich had worked under Agrippina and was well aware of her panoply of schemes. This had left him with a markedly more paranoid disposition than most of the peerage. Your typical rural noble wouldn’t cast a decades-long spell on a letter that would curse anyone but its intended recipient. Erich’s “better safe than sorry” attitude pushed him toward assuming that any noble could potentially be hiding vast magical talent, fit to eliminate any and all meddlers.

There was nothing wrong with being careful and prepared, but one had to be aware of the toll those meticulous standards took on those around them. Margit had an untainted worldview—she’d understood the whole time that Marsheim’s noble class wouldn’t go to such lengths.

“More than half are invitations to social events... Wow, he really is scrupulous. He’s included copies of his replies too.”

Baron Maulbronn was a social butterfly and seemed keen to keep track of his interactions. Unlike Erich’s old world where you could send an email and retain a digital copy of it, a letter, once sent, was gone for good. The baron must have wanted to keep copies so that he could assuage any anxieties if he had written something that ended up poorly received.

“Well, I am grateful; the more information for us, the better,” Margit murmured. “...Hm? Now what do we have here...”

While Margit was making copies of Baron Maulbronn’s correspondence, she noticed something out of the ordinary. Among his letters—all composed on high-quality stationery—was something written on cheaper, ruder material. It looked to be some kind of invitation from a merchant family, but the baron’s reply was openly caustic. In addition, there was a personal memo on his copy that warned his butler to *never again* accept a letter from the recipient.

“This warrants copying, that’s for certain.”

Margit finished working through the pile and closed the drawer.

“One more to go.”

The last phase was to check through the third drawer of the desk—almost three times the size of the two above. There were two locks; it was clear that the real mother lode lay inside.

After successfully unlocking the final drawer, Margit peered inside to find a collection of account books. They covered the baron’s receipts and expenditures in Marsheim and were carefully penned in a hand that wasn’t the baron’s own.

“This is Kaufmann; come in, Ubermut,” Margit said. “This drawer was hiding the most important thing of all. The household’s account books are inside. It isn’t for the territory, but they contain explicit records of his various expenses, in particular for entertaining guests.”

“Brilliant, Kaufmann! You’ve outdone yourself. And we can raise a glass to Baron Maulbronn later as thanks for his diligent management!”

Margit couldn’t suppress her smile as she imagined Erich beaming from the other end of the call. The baron must have been uninterested in managing his finances, and so the majordomo had been given full control over these logs. There were many nobles who, after a night of revelry, couldn’t remember how many drachmae they had spent, so this was a stroke of luck.

Margit and Erich were just happy that they had pulled together everything they’d wanted to know in one swift stroke. Margit wanted to raise a glass too—

she was overjoyed that she didn't have to spend another night up in the attic waiting for another chance to rifle through the baron's personal belongings.

"They're thick, so it's clear that they're meticulous. I doubt I have enough copy papers."

"Copy what you can. We're not going to go over it with a fine-tooth comb like the tax office would. If you can copy pages to give the general gist that would be perfect."

This was to be a crucial clue in finding out whether Baron Maulbronn was involved in the trade of Kykeon or if he got swept into it without even knowing. Kykeon was too cheap to affect the household's finances all that obviously, but any new venture was bound to show up on record.

If someone else was writing these up with official permission from the baron, then there would be hints that might lead to flushing out any other rats lurking.

"Hmm?"

As Margit was about to return one of the books, she noticed something odd. She narrowed her amber eyes and saw some dust settling at the bottom of the drawer. No, that wasn't quite right—there was dust peeking out of a small gap in the bottom. Realizing that this was a secret compartment, Margit pushed a lockpick underneath and pried it open to find something surprising—a thick stack of Kykeon.

"Come in Ubermut... I've found something rather troubling."

Judging from the size of the drawer and the way the dust was, it was likely that this secret compartment hadn't originally been there. The color of the drawer and the panel were slightly off.

"What should I do with it? Should we remove it?"

"...No, leave it there. I think we can use it."

The scout sighed before returning the panel to its original place. It looked like her partner had come up with yet another wicked scheme.

Margit wondered what foul woman in the capital had taught him such awful tricks and warped his very character like this. She reaffirmed her need to watch

over and tend to her dearest one as she left Baron Maulbronn's manor like a quivering shadow.

[Tips] It could be said that the Imperial capital's fiercest battleground is one of intelligence. Thus in Berylin, many nobles have installed bleeding-edge security systems and employ a wide range of counterespionage measures.

The manors in the idyllic countryside are nothing like their urban counterparts. However, one must always be alert that there may be an exception lurking somewhere. The unluckiest folk tend to use the most protective measures.

"What the *hell* is this?" Siegfried said, his brow furrowed.

The hero-hopeful had just entered a private room in the Snowy Silverwolf—the settled base for the Fellowship of the Blade—and was looking at the wall with a confused expression.

The room itself was a regular room. The four founding members of the Fellowship sometimes held meetings here, and if going back to their various lodgings was too much effort, they would nap here or stay the night. For these purposes there was a small desk and two bunk beds.

Before these four had started renting it out, other adventurers had used it in the past—who knew how many dreams had flourished or died in this room?

The reason for Siegfried's confusion was a single piece of "decoration." Erich had somehow procured a corkboard and affixed it to the wall. Upon it he had pinned various notes and memos, as well as hand drawn pictures of various figures in Marsheim. Threads of various colors connected the pins to create a hypnotically complex pattern.

"Isn't it so easy to visualize like this?!"

Goldilocks put on a goofy self-satisfied grin. He had spent two hours creating this evidence board in order to organize his intel on Marsheim's Kykeon crisis. He'd committed it all to memory—he hardly needed to put it out in the world like this for *his own* sake. Judging from the excited look in his eyes, he found joy

in the process, simply thrilled to finally have an excuse to do something like this.

“Did you forget that I can only read simple stuff?” Siegfried said. “Who’re you doin’ this for...?”

“Listen, it’s absolutely crucial that I did this. I had to. I’m a bit of a dab hand in matters like this.”

“Matters like *what*?”

The hero-hopeful wondered if one of Goldilocks’s screws had come loose. But from his friend’s manic mannerisms, he realized that this wasn’t something worth getting heated over. He sat down on the lower bunk of the bed—his bunk. Siegfried had once used the upper bunk, but for some reason found it difficult to sleep up there. Ever since he had rolled out of bed and tumbled to the ground, he had swapped with Erich.

“Now then, let us discuss the evil root at the heart of this Kykeon case,” Erich said. “I would propose that we give their group a name. Let’s see... Yes, let’s call them Diablo.”

“Diablo...? What language are you even speakin’?”

“It’s a language spoken in the subcontinent that faces the Aquamarine Sea in the west. It means ‘evil god’ or ‘evil spirit.’”

This name wasn’t based on any direct information; it was simply cribbed from a very similar sounding epithet of a drug lord back in Erich’s old world. However, in his current world of gods, the concept of a “devil” didn’t really exist. Fallen gods were still *gods*. The idea of a devil that set humans against gods just wasn’t widely understood, if it was understood at all. If a devil did exist, it would probably be viewed as a god from another pantheon, or perhaps an apostle of another religion. Even if you likened them to a hypothetical “sum of all evil,” most people would probably shrug their shoulders in confusion.

At any rate, Diablo could be found right in the middle of the corkboard—represented by a large white question mark upon a black slip of paper. From there, threads went out to link various figures—represented by their drawn likenesses.

At the top of the board were the most important people in Marsheim—the

nobles, the shot-callers, and various adventurer clans—and the further you went down the board, the lower their social standing. Right at the bottom were the local lords. These ran the gamut from the big names that anyone in Ende Erde knew to houses which were only known by their own social circle. The lengths Erich had gone to dig up all this information stood out plain as day.

“You’re even weirder than usual today,” Siegfried said. “You were out all night two days ago and you were working all of last night too. Have you slept at all?”

“With what time? Look how much info there was to get through! I was having such a blast that I wouldn’t be able to sleep anyway, so I went over some of the new dirt with Schnee.”

“So you’re runnin’ on two days without sleep, and you got someone in their sick bed to read through that *massive* stack of paper?”

Goldilocks’s eyes were wide and frenzied. He was riding high on the chemicals from his brain’s own pleasure centers—no external assistance necessary. His body had reasoned that if Erich’s mood wasn’t good, then he’d shut down entirely. This ecstasy was a preventative measure.

The stack that Siegfried had mentioned was on the desk below the evidence board. Although he couldn’t read them well, he knew that they were the results of their infiltration of Baron Maulbronn’s manor the other night. He couldn’t believe that his comrade had gotten someone whose guts had only started to patch themselves together again to sift through it all.

Goldilocks defended his corner, though—he hadn’t shaken Schnee awake and forced her to read this with him. Schnee knew that she had a much better eye for this sort of work, and so she’d asked Erich herself to bring his finds from the manor to her. After all, Erich and Margit had used Schnee’s blueprints and notes in her place. In return for them, Schnee made Erich promise that he wouldn’t advance things without her. She might have been bedbound, but that didn’t stop her from using her brain.

Schnee’s assessment of her abilities had paid out. She only needed a single glance to pick out the fishy pages from the baron’s diary and letters, quickly deciding what was important and what was meaningless noise. Her gift was heaven-sent. A layperson would need twenty or thirty times more time to draw

the same conclusions. It would take a small army of regular people to do what Schnee did in a fraction of the time for a fraction of the cost.

“You guys sure can read a lot in one night,” Siegfried went on. “But, Erich, how many drachmae did just the *paper* cost in this whole thing?”

“Who knows! But our home is in danger! You’d do whatever you could, wouldn’t you, Siegfried?!”

“Huh? Well, yeah. I’d do anything, sure...”

“Heh... You’d do *anything*.”

“Uh, you said that exact phrase before, man. Does it...mean something?”

Two sleepless nights had left Erich punch-drunk and meme-brained, but with the road before him, he paid his gaffe no heed.

“Anyway, doing ‘anything’ aside, our foe is powerful and uses underhanded methods. This isn’t the way we do things around here!”

“Even when people around here are using drugs...?”

“Siegfried, a thought experiment, if you will. If you were a local lord, what would you want from Marsheim?”

The hero-hopeful scratched his chin at this unexpected question. If he were one of the local powerhouses, then he would hate for this hilltop fortress to be weakened so much that loss was all but guaranteed. He would almost want to set it on fire to try and bring *some* life back to it.

But if you were considering things from the standpoint of an Imperial statesman, then things were slightly different.

“I’d want to stay unharmed, I guess,” Siegfried finally said. “Even after achieving independence or whatever, there’s no avoiding a war with the Empire.”

“Exactly. Our home is a stronghold of eight thousand that held off fifty thousand. And that was in the past. Now we’re stronger, but our defensive power’s never really been tested. If the local lords wanted to take on the largest fighting force the Empire can spare—an army of two hundred thousand soldiers—then you’d want to go into that situation from the least compromised

position of strength possible.”

Marsheim was famed for the tale that the hill and castle had been erected in a single night, and this strange tactic had resulted in a powerful fortress city that had never fallen. Even after years of untamed expansion, the city walls still held a multilayered defense that resembled a terrace farm—although it seemed like it had grown without much thought, it was clear that it still maintained a strategic structure.

Towers could be quickly transformed into watchtowers; sluice gates could redirect water into the conduits and dirty streams to form defensive rivers—the city was a relic of the past margrave of Marsheim’s desire to never yield to the local lords.

Even now, although Marsheim Castle was really nothing more than a landmark of the region’s bloody past, Marsheim itself was still a powerful fortress. It was clear that the problems here, if left unchecked, wouldn’t remain isolated to the region. Even a beginner to the art of war knew that this bastion would be crucial in the event of an Imperial insurgence from the east.

“But Diablo is different,” Erich went on. “They are trying to numb Marsheim. That goes *against* the eventual goal of independence, don’t you think?”

“Yeah, even if the strongarms kick out Margrave Marsheim, they ain’t gonna be too thrilled to find themselves in a bunch of skirmishes after it... Hey, hold on. *Who* the hell is gonna win out at the end of all this?”

Siegfried groaned with the effort of wondering what the end goal could be. Erich snapped his fingers and pointed at his friend—this was the crux of the matter.

Ruining Marsheim would, at first glance, seem to benefit the local lords. However, it posed a huge disadvantage when it came to long-term strategy. Marsheim was slowly being sapped of its strategic utility. It was an appealing move in the short term, but hobbling the city’s productive capacity and fighting power was akin to shooting yourself in the foot before running a marathon.

Therefore, it was highly likely that there was someone in the background who had something to gain from allowing the local lords this tenuous lead as the Empire suffered.

“Well, to be honest, there’s a ton of people outside and inside that would be whooping and cheering if the Empire’s nose was bloodied. We don’t have enough evidence to point any fingers.”

“Huh? Why’d people on the *inside* want that? Imperial nobles would totally suffer if the Empire’s trade gateway suffered.”

“The Empire’s got its fair share of people who are useless unless we’re at war.”

It was as Erich said—the Trialist Empire of Rhine, unfortunately, wasn’t composed solely of people who stood to make great gains from peacetime. It was still early days—still far from the point where people would say that the war was no longer worth the cost. It wasn’t yet the state seen during the First World War on Earth, where each industrial nation’s hunger for greater productive power—for material surplus, for labor, for capital—had driven them into a frenzy.

The Empire had expended a lot of resources during the previous war of the Second Eastern Conquest, but money didn’t simply vanish. It always found its way into someone else’s pocket—sometimes with interest. It was impossible to count just how many people had made a killing from plunder or ransom just because their side was the one that came out on top. There were many people rubbing their hands in anticipation of the next war to be waged.

Although the Empire as a whole might lose out, it was important not to forget that there were foolish individuals or families who salivated over the idea of a new war—a new opportunity to line one’s purse.

“Hmm...” Erich murmured. “Come to think of it, I know someone who’d benefit from military expansion...”

“Whuzzat?”

“Nothing. Forget what I said.”

Even now, whenever Erich’s thoughts touched on plotting and scheming, the smirking face of that *thing* would appear in his mind. He rubbed his temples to dull the headache that began to buzz underneath. Although she wouldn’t go this far, it was a fact that the military expectations of the successful work on the

aeroship meant that she was receiving quite the budget. She wasn't a complete bystander by any means.

Goldilocks was a common civilian at heart, and so he shook with fear as he imagined what sort of gargantuan budget just one ship would need. At any rate, the plan was to confront Diablo, so he tapped the corkboard.

"It's not all bad news though. Thanks to the intel we sourced from Baron Maulbronn and Baron Wiesache, we've got a grip on the shape of the plots entangling Marsheim."

"So is the idiot Viscount Besigheim the real crook?"

"Nah, he's just a moron, plain and simple. It's true that he's underhanded in his own ways, but he's not the kind of person who would plot something like this."

Erich still retained various fragments from his past life, and he was probably thinking of Oishi Kuranosuke or Sima Yi, who had played the fool in order to avoid being encircled by their enemies. Such great figures had lain in wait until the right time, but Viscount Besigheim was not such a savvy gentleman. He was a fool on a molecular level.

Most adventurers had seen his pointless requests on the Association bulletins, but that wasn't the extent of his activities. He was a waster who spent over a hundred drachmae with his favorite woman in the pleasure district. His magistrates in his territory did what they liked. He was, in short, a multifaceted and inveterate crook. Schnee had followed up with the viscount's favorite "companion" before she was injured and concluded that he was a fool, yes, but not personally implicated in this affair.

"Fortunately, working for an idiot makes you an even bigger idiot, apparently. Feast your eyes on this."

"Like I said, you ain't gonna get a reaction out of something I can't read..."

Siegfried didn't know what the letters and business accounts thrust before him said, nor would he be able to piece together their meaning even if someone read them out, but Erich's point was thus: a number of Viscount Besigheim's subordinates made use of the fact that their liege was an idiot to

do as they pleased.

“So, these letters and money records told you that the idiot viscount is involved in the trade of Kykeon?” Siegfried said. “Like, not the stuff that goes on in Marsheim, but bringing it *into* Marsheim?”

“In short, yes. Wow, congrats on breaking down my whole spiel into a couple of bullet points.”

This was far more preferable to Siegfried not understanding at all, but Erich, after working so hard to explain the situation, felt the strength leave his knees. Simply put, it was as he said. Although Viscount Besigheim *personally* wasn't involved with Kykeon, several of his subordinates had been bribed.

They might have intended to sell some for a little bit of extra pocket money, but they didn't treat it as a serious venture. This relaxed attitude would eventually be their undoing. In time their misdeeds would come to light, and naturally the blame would fall to Viscount Besigheim. Erich and Schnee had come to the conclusion that false evidence had been planted on the two barons so that they could be taken down at the same time as the viscount.

“You called me out personally to chat about this stuff in detail,” Siegfried said. “That means whatever you're plannin', it's not a raid like last time, right?”

“You always catch on quick, comrade.”

The young hero-hopeful'd had a knot in his stomach when he responded to Erich's summons earlier, fearing something bad to come, but his hunch had let him steel himself. It helped him manage the inevitable headache as his friend spoke of his unhinged schemes as lightly as one's host might propose a pleasant springtime stroll.

“Now, we need to pick which one of us will take the lead this time,” Erich said.

“It's gotta be me. I mean, I can *totally* see what you're aimin' for. ‘Step one, pretend we got in a big ol' fight and one of us leaves the clan. Step two, get on good terms with the dealers and find out who's pullin' the strings.’ The boss can't be the one doin' that kinda dirty work.”

Siegfried shook his head, indicating that he knew Erich's MO by now, but when he looked at his friend, he noticed that Erich had a strange expression. It

wasn't the face of someone who had the words taken out of their mouth—no, it said, “I didn't realize that was an option.”

Siegfried felt his blood run cold.

“Wow, Sieg, I was just going to get either you or me hired as the viscount's bodyguard or something.”

Siegfried couldn't see his own expression, but he knew it had regret written all over it.

“Going undercover, eh,” Erich went on. “It's risky, but a good plan. We wouldn't have any restrictions on our side too. Yeah, we could *really* make it blow up...”

“H-Hey, Erich? C-Can we forget I said anything?”

“It'll be a good opportunity to finally bring *him* out into the light... Two birds with one stone, as they say...”

“S-Stop that! Y-Y'know, your plan sounded *way* better! C'mon, man, I just listened to too many dumb heroic tales! Stop that—*stop talking!* I ain't as clever as you!”

This new plot bore all too striking a resemblance to a story from the vast library of heroic tales and legends burned into Siegfried's brain. The second-in-command of a party had pretended to fight with the leader so that he could go undercover at a noble manor and bring all the evil noble's shady doings to light—it was a tale of self-sacrifice and eventual glory.

But that was a story. It wasn't the same as doing it yourself.

The Fellowship of the Blade's second-in-command tried to stammer his way into saying he had misspoken, but the leader ignored his comments, muttering to himself as he added more paper to the corkboard all the while.

[Tips] There is no law in the Trialist Empire of Rhine invalidating evidence procured by illegal means.

“B-B-Boss, are you okay?!”

“Yeah, fine.”

It happened with no warning.

It was just as night was settling in, as the chill that signaled autumn finally arrived, that the Fellowship of the Blade’s leader and second-in-command started arguing.

No one knew the reason for their sudden altercation. The day had proceeded like any other. They had come back from a day of work and were all happily drinking. Erich and Siegfried had gone to a private room to chat, but in the space of two hours all hell had broken loose.

No one knew who had struck the first blow. The only thing that the onlookers knew was that this was *serious*. They had resorted to their fists, fangs bared and hungry for blood. One or both of them might indeed have received permanent damage if the owner of the Snowy Silverwolf hadn’t forced them to break it up.

Gerrit, a rookie member of the Fellowship of the Blade, had been sick to his stomach as he watched the terrible scene play out. After the fight had ended, he’d supported Erich and taken him to a private room. Now he was tending to his clan leader. He gave him a cloth to wipe away the sweat and blood. Erich spat something out into it—it was a tooth.

Margit was calming down the situation in the main room. Kaya, naturally, was tending to Siegfried. By process of elimination, Gerrit found himself looking after Erich.

“Shit, that country bum really got me,” Erich spat. “Never learned the first thing about politics—never got *any* real learning—but he still ran his damn mouth...”

Gerrit could sense a genuine anger in his voice. The knot in his stomach only grew tighter.

The intensity of their fight suggested that perhaps irreparable damage had been done to their bond. Both of them had shown a horrible bloodlust—something that two adventurers of their level never did anymore—and had started pummeling one another’s faces. Neither was sated with one or two blows, and the bloody fight had left Erich with the beginnings of a nasty bruise

on his left cheek and a trickle of blood from his nose.

Gerrit had only gotten a glance at Siegfried, but his cheek was bleeding and he must have had a cut in his mouth, because he'd been spitting blood.

Erich was usually so calm and collected, never losing his graceful composure, so what had caused such a shift in his mood? He and Siegfried were always on such good terms, always understood each other, so what in the world could have come between them? Gerrit had been by them day in and day out, but he had no idea what it could have been.

"The bastard knocked a tooth out..." Erich muttered.

"U-Um...what happened between you?" Gerrit said.

"Beg *pardon*?"

Gerrit only wanted to know why it was that the Fellowship's top two had fought, but as soon as he asked the question Erich replied with uncharacteristic venom in his voice. Erich was sitting down and leaning forward on his knees, but he raised his head slightly to glare at Gerrit. His blue eyes glittered with the residual flames of the brawl. The stare was like a knife.

"Ah...!"

Gerrit hadn't initially joined the Fellowship of the Blade out of a love for adventure. He had his own personal mission. But as he worked alongside his Fellows, fighting to hell and back with them, he'd been forged into a proud swordsman and a full man in his own right (or so he reasoned he must have after the first Kykeon raid; he'd taken his first life that day, after all). He had been content with his lot. After all, his mission didn't impinge on his daily life, and the Fellowship's amiable collective temperament was, in his eyes, ideal for him.

Gerrit couldn't lie to himself—a general ambivalence had turned into genuine attachment. Although the harmonious atmosphere made it comfortable to stay, his time here had become something *more than that*. He was blessed by kind companions and two irreplaceable leaders. Erich had diligently taught him how to swing his sword properly. Siegfried never failed to spot when he was in a funk and dragged him to the baths to clear his head. Life with the Fellowship

was *good*. Its peaceful and genial image, to Gerrit at least, seemed to be lifted straight out of the Age of Gods.

“The reason me and that *thing* are fighting is of no concern to you. Got it?”

Trouble bubbled in Gerrit’s breast—would it be so wrong to come clean now? He knew that it wasn’t right of him to unveil the mission he had been given, but that task set to him seemed almost pointless weighed against the fate of the Fellowship. He didn’t want to see the clan fall apart. He loathed the notion that he might one day have to part from this world, where the air was thick with sweat and hot blood and yet clean and fresh as the height of spring.

If it meant saving this home he had found for himself, then it would be far, far better to toss aside his foolish pride and the weight of his secrets and finally win Erich’s trust. The young mensch steeled his resolve.

“Boss, I gotta...” Gerrit said before clearing his throat. “My apologies. It is necessary that I discuss something with you.”

“What?”

Erich’s eyes were as cold as ever. The meaning behind his stare was obvious: *Pry any further or try and mediate things, and I’ll kill you on the spot.* It reaffirmed Gerrit’s suspicions. There must be a reason for Erich, ever smiling and usually so kind—even at his most strict—to wear such an expression. If it meant showing Erich the depths of his resolve, he didn’t care if he had to share a secret or two.

Gerrit fixed his posture before standing upright with his heels touching—a noble show of respect.

“I am a spy.”

In order to get Erich to believe him, for them to talk heart-to-heart, he had to lay himself bare. Gerrit was an honest lad who thought in straight lines. This was the method that suited him best.

“My real name isn’t Gerrit, but Gerhard. Gerhard Silberbauer.”

And so, on a night of his fifteenth year, the illegitimate noble son shared his secret to save the two men he admired so much.

[Tips] One of the unwritten laws of the adventuring community states that bar fights should remain confined to the bar.

Today was full of unexpected events. To be honest, in the grand scheme of things it was really damn productive. I got to go over our finds with Schnee and put everything up on that corkboard. Then I had a little one-on-one meeting with Siegfried to get him up to speed.

Then there was his little suggestion. The world was full of adages about the priceless nature of time, but I didn't think we'd end up having a fistfight immediately after our chat. And what do you think that bastard said to me when I proposed it? "Huh?! I get to say anything I want to you *and* hit you as much as I want?! In front of *everyone*?!"

Why had he seemed so excited at the prospect? After two days without sleep, my brain finally stopped working. I even started to doubt my own senses. What on earth had I done to him to garner this much anger under the surface? I mean, I admit that I pushed his buttons sometimes just so I could watch him heap his lid, but his eyes were positively sparkling at the prospect of beating me silly. And he was true to his word. He hit me with everything he had—verbally and physically.

I wasn't going to berate the guy. The plan was to make it seem as real a fight as possible. Kaya could patch up any scratches, bruises, or lost teeth, so neither of us held anything back. It was thanks to that safety net that we could really land those hits that would leave our faces looking swollen and ugly. On top of that, we weren't kids or complete newcomers to beatdowns. We had trained ourselves to go for our foes' squishiest points—for the head, you're looking at someone's eyes and throat—and so we'd landed some calculated blows during our bloody scrap.

But he really gave it to me when it came to the insults. "You always expect *way* too damn much of me!" "Quit the adventurin' business! Showy brats like you belong on a stage!" "I swear on my mother's grave, some days it feels like I'm the harem guard for your one-man *escort service*!"

Harsh, my guy. And what the hell was he on about, insinuating I'm some kind of dude of the evening? It was true that I made a habit of complimenting women, but it wasn't like I was hitting on them—I just figured most gals could use a little moral support most of the time, so long as it was appropriate to the situation. It was common knowledge that if you had a job where you worked with women, you should always err on the side of overpraising!

Stupid piece of crap Siegfried...

I wasn't even acting right now. I was pretty bummed out, to be completely honest. My broken molar hurt, but my heart hurt more.



I actually really struggled to think about insults to throw back at the guy. I had tried to think of some during the thirty minutes I spent with a stiff drink after our meeting and before the fight, but after all my hemming and hawing the only thing I could come up with was “stupid country bumpkin.”

Ah, I would like to amend my statement earlier. I said today *was* full of unexpected events, but that made it seem like the surprises were all done after our slugfest.

No, the surprises kept on coming.

“My real name isn’t Gerrit, but Gerhard. Gerhard Silberbauer.”

Right now, Gerrit, one of our Fellows, was locked in a standing bow right before me, completely nonchalant in admitting that he’d been our mole the whole time.

Gerrit was two years younger than me. He’d signed up with the Fellowship shortly after we had started making our name. He painted a tough figure—more inches on him than most, broad shoulders, measured posture, square jaw. He was still young, but his face was extremely distinguished. Throw in the hazel curls on his head and the steely gaze of his gray, inset eyes, and most would assume that he was already well into his twenties.

When he first revealed his age, I thought he was trying to pull one over on me. The misunderstanding didn’t last long, though. All it took was watching how he acted. He was earnest almost to a fault—no adult was quite so green.

However, I had been suspicious that he might be a spy since early on; Schnee’s intel about his true identity had backed me up. I’d decided that this charade with Siegfried was the perfect means to give him a bit of a shake and see if he revealed his true colors.

“I know you probably think this sudden,” Gerrit went on, “but please allow me to explain myself.”

He’d told me at the beginning that he was born and raised right in the outskirts of Ende Erde. But it just didn’t track. He carried himself too well, spoke too eloquently. It didn’t make sense for someone to have all the intonations and inflections of palatial speech down pat if your father was a simple

merchant. No matter how much Gerrit had tried to vulgarize his speech, he'd never managed to fully hide certain ingrained quirks of his speech.

From his lingering palatial diction, I'd been a bit worried that he was a spy for some noble or maybe one of the local lords, so I had tested him a little by treating him a little bit harsher during training and missions than I had the others. I knew it wasn't quite as simple as this—if he were here with a mission, then he wouldn't come clean with just a little bit of raking over the coals.

“Boss... No, Mister Erich, I infiltrated the Fellowship of the Blade under orders to see whether you were acting for Marsheim's benefit.”

All the same, I had taught him fairly and with all the care I gave everyone else, even if my own self-interest was bubbling under the surface. There were many who had joined at the same time as Gerrit, seeking to ride on the wave that the Fellowship had created, so I made sure that none of them had too easy a time of it, even if he received the brunt of it.

I don't know whether it was the burning desire to see his job through or if he was just a guy with a solid backbone, but Gerrit didn't waver despite that.

Schnee had provided me with some more background on him. When I found out that he was the illegitimate son of a noble and was originally from a northern satellite state to the north of Marsheim, I understood why he was such a tough cookie. Folk from there often came to Marsheim to earn more money than they could back home, which meant that they were strict about teaching their kids Rhinian. In other words, the bruises and aching muscles that Gerrit had earned through his time here were all for the sake of his family. I could relate to the guy—I had gone to Berylin for Elisa's sake, after all.

Part of the fight with Siegfried was to see what Gerrit's purpose here was—what goal was worth all the suffering he had gone through. But before I could start probing him, he had fessed up all of his own accord.

Hold it Gerrit... Or, no, right, it's Gerhard, I thought. I've spent a good season teaching you, so I know you're a good kid, so where did this all come from, huh?

“I...” Gerrit went on. Sniffles and coughs began to interrupt his speech. “The Fellowship... I couldn't...”

What was going on?! This reaction was not in any of the possible futures I had envisioned! I'd sooner have expected him to pull out a slip of Kykeon for me from his inner pocket!

"The thing is..." he went on, still sputtering, "I... I love the Fellowship! I... Please... Please patch things up with Big Bro Sieg!"

"W-Wait, hold on, Gerrit..."

"If some household complained about you...and that's the reason you fought...then it's all my fault! I've been reporting on your work ethic and who you've been working with this whole time!"

Gerrit's face was covered in snot and tears by now. I was taken aback by the fact that my junior—one that was taller than me, no less—was doing his best to cheer me up. I tried to get him to calm down, but he wouldn't stop blaming himself.

A light bulb suddenly went on in my head. This was because of that stupid insult I had spent a good half hour cooking up! I had berated Siegfried for being a country bumpkin who knew nothing of politics, and that must have set our spy's alarm bells ringing.

And so Gerrit explained the situation. Apparently his father had asked him to infiltrate "Goldilocks's upstart clan" and assess the risk it might pose to the pro-Margrave Marsheim faction.

Gerrit's age and the fact that he was still a greenhorn were probably the chief reasons he had been chosen for the job. He was an illegitimate son who could not succeed the family, so they didn't lose anything by sending him undercover into a new, poorly understood clan. His education qualified him to write, read, and follow orders well enough. He was the perfect disposable playing piece.

"During my whole time here," Gerrit said, "I thought that you and Big Bro Sieg had an unshakable friendship, and nothing would ever come between you. I told them that! I said that you were an ideal adventurer, loyal to Marsheim in the utmost!"

W-Wow, he really laid it on thick. In the past I had heard him grumble that I treated him so harshly that he thought he saw blood in his piss, or that despite

my looks I was a demon on the inside. I would have thought he had given a report that painted me in a far worse light. It had gone beyond my wildest expectations that our spy would have such a glowing opinion of our operation.

Had I finally started those first small steps to becoming a sort of paragon of virtue? For a moment I found myself up on cloud nine with his compliment, but I quickly brought myself back down to earth. It wasn't the time for that. I grabbed young Gerrit's shoulders.

"I'm beyond happy that you shared this with me. You don't need to cry. You signed up with your family's welfare in mind and you earned your place here through your own talents."

"Mister Erich... Ohh, Mister Erich... I'm a despicable traitor."

"Hey, now. A Fellow shouldn't cry this much! You're going to make your blade cry too! And more importantly, you're hardly a traitor in my eyes."

If Gerrit had signed up to help his household get a foot in the door with my clan or to earn some cash for his future career, then I might have shaken him a little and sent him into the yard to do five thousand swings in penance. Or, no, maybe I'd have made him melt down his blade and forge it anew. But he'd hardly had much choice in the matter with his folks bearing down on him. I couldn't in good conscience blame him for this.

Then there came the purpose of his sleuthing. He'd had every opportunity to drag our name through the mud, and instead he'd practically sung our praises to his father—a man he couldn't even acknowledge as such in public. I thought that these good deeds and his just heart outweighed his dishonesty.

Admittedly, behavior like this wasn't good for any organization. It might have turned out good for us, but it wasn't ideal to simply move on from something that could have gone either way. All the same, he was fifteen. Anyone of his age would find themselves rushing into things with much forethought. I couldn't find the wherewithal to lecture him at this point.

It did feel a bit awkward to think that I'd come up with this whole ploy on the fly when presumably I could have pulled this off *without* getting beaten like a redheaded stepchild.

“You did your best and worked on our behalf because you love the Fellowship of the Blade, right, Gerrit?” I said. “And now you’re sharing everything with me. I don’t think such an honest ‘traitor’ exists anywhere else in the world!”

“Ohhh, Mister Erich...”

“Hey, Gerrit? Will you call me ‘Boss’ once more?”

“O-Of course, Boss!”

After a few moments in my tall and burly junior’s bearish, teary hug, Gerrit finally calmed down enough for me to start asking him a few questions.

I had envisioned that someone, most likely a noble, would try to dig up dirt on the Fellowship, but I hadn’t considered that they’d resort to internal methods. I had been on guard for one of our noble clients to give us a job that was more cruel than fair, and so I hadn’t foreseen them sending in someone—and someone who gelled so well with our clan—to infiltrate us.

But once I had all the details laid out in front of me, it wasn’t so hard to stomach.

“Can I just clarify why you were sent to us?” I asked. “So, you were ordered to join the Fellowship to see if we would be of benefit to Marsheim or not?”

“Yes... After all, Marsheim is hardly the best place to look if you’re in need of an abundance of *reputable* adventurers to employ.”

“Ahh... Yes, point made.”

Marsheim was full of untrustworthy clans. Any adventurer with the mettle to even attempt to strike out on their own would find themselves sucked into a clan before they had the time to make a name for themselves. Those who did manage to achieve some form of independence ended up making at least some kind of connection to clans or local heroes that needed some extra firepower, or they just had too strong a personality to be used by anyone.

The Heilbronn Familie’s freeloader, the zentaur Manfred the Tongue-Splitter, fell into the former category; my teacher in all things adventuring, Mister Fidelio, fell into the latter category with the rest of his party.

Back when I was a newbie, some of the clans had tried to get up in my face.

Adventurers who still had no connections or loyalties were a valuable resource. Mister Fidelio was an adventurer with exceptional talents, but his loyalty was somewhat malleable. If he sensed that the person he was working for was immoral or using him for illicit purposes, he wouldn't hesitate to turn coat and leave. He exemplified the kind of untethered lifestyle that nobles wouldn't want to rely on.

"I sent my father a report on the Fellowship's activities every ten days," Gerrit said. "Updates on whether we were involving ourselves with ne'er-do-wells or not, whether we were doing our jobs properly or not, what the current size of the clan was..."

The more he told me about what he did, the more I felt that he hadn't really posed any threat to our clan at all. The way he'd broken down and come clean bordered on an overreaction on his part, under the circumstances. It reminded me of how my own dad used to call me from time to time to see how I was doing back in my old world more than anything. This didn't feel super spy-like to me...

"Um, is that really all, Gerrit? You weren't asked to do anything more, were you? Like making copies of our account books? Or to take on specific jobs? Or to find out what my weaknesses were or what opportunities would be best to assassinate me should I prove to be a liability to Marsheim?"

"Of course not! Even if I were asked to do such a thing, I would never do it! More importantly, my father isn't that kind of person!"

I could only nod back with a timid "G-Gotcha" after this impassioned rebuttal.

Despite Gerrit's father using his son as a pawn, he didn't seem to be an utterly heartless man. He was on the margrave's side, and he'd even been on board with me joining the peerage.

"But," Gerrit went on, "my father's tired. You see, someone *is* keen to hear about your failures and scandals, Boss."

Hmm, now that's fascinating. I was an adventurer, yet I had turned down the great honor of being knighted. It was no surprise that a decision like that would turn some folks against me. It would have made more sense for one of these hypothetical enemies to have skipped past hiring *spies* and gone straight to

assassins, if I was being honest. Did someone want to publicly settle their qualms with me? Or did they just dislike me, and that was the end of it?

Whatever the case, I could use this. I felt a bit bad for Gerrit, but this worked perfectly for my plans. Instead of using my current connections to alert the former local lords and the nobility of the dangers of Kykeon, it would be far more effective to use someone upstanding like Gerrit's father to the same ends.

"The person I mentioned... I thought that maybe they had done something to get in between you and our big bro!"

The more Gerrit spoke the worse I felt about using him, but I needed to push those emotions down for now. I had lost a tooth in my earlier performance; it made sense to keep my audience to be as plentiful and strung along as possible.

"I see... You did great, Gerrit, honestly. But the truth is our falling out is wholly unrelated."

"No!"

"Sorry, but I can't work with him any longer."

This whole little secret plan with Siegfried might have been conceived in a fit of sleepless delirium, but I needed to see it through. Still, fooling your friends to fool your enemies hurt more than I thought it would.

I had simply wanted to know what our resident spy's motives were; how had it come to this?

I pushed down the churning ball of guilt in the pit of my stomach and handed the bloodied cloth back to Gerrit.

[Tips] When an organization gets big enough, it becomes susceptible to infiltration by observers for concerned third parties. However, they are not necessarily sent with bad intentions.

Siegfried wished he could go back to three days ago, take his past self's spear, and smack himself over the head a good few times.

He knew that he was at fault for being so cocksure and saying that he would

do anything, but at the moment, that was only a secondary annoyance. Siegfried had finally gotten used to the home he and Kaya had spent their savings on and enjoyed the creature comforts of a decent bed. Yet now here he was, stuck in a cheap inn, slumming it once more with the fleas and the bedbugs.

“Tch... Looks like I got too used to the high life,” the hero-hopeful muttered to himself. He cursed under his breath as he coated the dirty bed with a special insect repellent that Kaya had made from white chrysanthemum for him. Once he had sanitized the bed, he finally felt calm enough to sit down.

Siegfried had spent countless nights back in his home in Illfurth in worse circumstances than these, but it seemed that your senses were warped the instant you were exposed to more humane conditions. He sighed.

Suppressing the urge to close his eyes and let sleep come, Siegfried pulled out a magic item from under his shirt. It was a necklace that looked like the choker Margit wore, but the mechanism embedded in it removed any fashion value it might have had. This was a creation worked on by both Erich and Kaya—an all-new magic item that would safely relay Voice Transfer.

“Now where is it... Aha, here we go.”

Siegfried stuck his hands out the window and felt around the frame—so warped that the window only opened halfway now—and found a little needle sticking out of the wood. A thread so fine that you could only see it from certain angles trailing off from it into the distance.

“Hellooo? Anyone there?” Siegfried said.

“I hear you loud and clear,” came the reply.

Through this communication device, which used Margit’s webbing to transmit sound without producing even the smallest mana wave, Siegfried could hear Goldilocks’s voice, along with a slight crackle in the background.

Unlike the expedition to Baron Maulbronn’s manor, they were not using signals or code names this time. Whereas Erich and Margit had used intermediary signals to relay their voices, this time their methods were completely analog—Margit complained to Erich afterward, saying that she

would never weave such a long thread ever again—which meant that there was zero chance of interference.

“I got in contact with ’em,” Siegfried said. “The sight of the silver shut ’em up real quick.”

“No matter how smart the organization, they can’t weed out every fool who works at the fringes, huh?”

“I’m more amazed that they didn’t even bat an eyelid after our crappy performance, y’know.”

Siegfried had found himself in a cheap inn because he was seeing his suggestion through. He’d openly fought with Erich and walked straight out of the Fellowship of the Blade. Kaya had tried to stop him, saying that he didn’t need to go this far, but the hero-hopeful had simply said that if he was following the plan, then he wanted to do it properly. It was a decision Siegfried had come to alone, and he wanted to make sure he stuck to it.

If the hero-hopeful wanted to fool his friends, then he needed to be even more careful and thorough than if he were dealing with his enemies. If he half-assed any part of this, then who knew where his story might start to unravel? He was already paranoid that his performance in the Snowy Silverwolf wasn’t all that believable, so he had racked his brains for ways to shore up his case.

Siegfried also needed distance from his Fellows. If he stayed somewhere nearby or easy to locate, then there was no doubt that some worried clan members would come to find him and try to convince him to return. Keeping any bothersome interference from his friends to a minimum was essential.

“D’you really think they’re gonna sell this stuff to me so easily?” Siegfried said. “I’ve already screwed up their operation before. I thought they’d be extra wary of me.”

Siegfried glanced over at a small bag he had tossed onto the floor. Inside were dozens of sheets of Kykeon. Earlier, he had paid a visit to one of Viscount Besigheim’s subordinates who’d been selling Kykeon to make some small change, and they had sold it to him without even batting an eyelid.

“Hey, you need to thank your performance for that,” Erich said. “They

investigated you before too, remember? I bet they think you're craving some more Kykeon after you were doused in the stuff during the raid."

"Hmm, yeah, well, I tried to sell the performance by goin' to one of their watering holes and drinkin' a ton of booze with them. I really ain't a heavyweight, so I was worried I was gonna screw up. But man, I didn't get drunk *at all*. I had to play it up! I was shittin' myself wondering if they could tell I was fakin' it."

The public had no clue as to exactly why Siegfried and Erich had fallen out, but what they did know was that one of the four key members responsible for laying the Infernal Knight to waste had walked out on his party and his clan.

Siegfried had let the masses form their own theories about why he had left; he was busy making swift progress piecing together the general picture of Kykeon deals in Marsheim. In the past three days he had begun by securing the room at this inn before heading to a run-down tavern and buying drink after drink to drown his woes. To top it off, he had pretended that only a fresh hit of Kykeon could make him forget his pain.

It had been quite a shock to see just how easy it had been to buy a fat stack of Kykeon. He was a straightforward adventurer; he thought it would be quicker to deal with the seller by ratting them out to the guard. However, he knew deep down that getting one of Viscount Besigheim's people arrested wouldn't solve the overall problem Marsheim was facing.

"How'd you manage to fake it?" Erich said. "I can always tell when you're sloshed—the blood rushes to your cheeks."

"Well... I held my breath and made 'em go red that way."

"Brute forced it, huh?"

"Shut it. Anyway, you sorted out a way for me to get rid of this crap?"

The hero-hopeful's gambit had held out so far, but he was playing the long game. If someone came into his room and found that the stack was untouched, they would question whether he was as down on his luck as he said he was.

"Yep, we've got the Baldur Clan's full support. They'll make sure not a trace remains. Leave the Kykeon under your pillow and someone will come pick it up

while you're out. They'll dispose of it safely."

"Now that's a relief. Can't just go throwin' it on the fire like other trash, huh?"

Erich had pulled some strings behind the scenes to get the Baldur Clan in on his scheme. One aspect that they would help with was getting rid of any Kykeon in a chemically safe manner. They couldn't leave it just lying around for someone else to pick up and use. Setting it alight wouldn't neutralize it; if someone breathed in the smoke, who knew what kind of disaster would await. No one knew what would occur if it was disposed of in the river either. It would have taken Kaya far too long to neutralize it personally, so Erich had no other option but to go to the professionals and ask them to devise a tool that would speed up the process.

Fortunately, not only were the Kykeon dealers infringing on Nanna's turf, she also had her own personal reasons to see the drug expunged from Ende Erde. She had given her assent to safely dispose of the goods without a moment's hesitation.

Nanna had told Erich that she'd picked up the knack for neutralizing drugs like these. Erich took Nanna's word for it. Her time at the College had left her intimately familiar with how to dispose of her and her teacher's failed creations in a way that was strictly up to code. Some no-name mages in the Mages' Corridor would simply flush any unwanted concoctions down into the sewers—the evidence could be seen in the occasional unfortunate rat that turned up dead with technicolor foam coating their mouth—but flushing your bad first drafts on the College's campus was akin to dealing contraband. They had to play by the book. Erich was heartened to know that he had someone experienced to help him with disposal.

"Kaya said she should be finished with that potion in a day or two, by the way," Erich said. "She was struggling a bit. Apparently making a healthy person seem sick is far more difficult than making unhealthy skin healthy."

"Yeah, but it'd be weird to have a druggie look completely fine," Siegfried said. "Tell her thanks from me."

"She got me to try one of the prototypes. Made my face turn purple! I hope she wasn't trying to get one over on me for sending you out on this mission..."

Siegfried couldn't hold back his laughter. The thought of Erich, always so graceful and elegant with that indelible smirk on his lips, with the complexion of an eggplant was *sidesplitting*. To an outsider, Kaya seemed like a demure young woman who liked following the crowd, but in truth she had a strong personality underneath. When she got mad, she got *incensed*. Siegfried couldn't stop smiling at Kaya's all too likely deliberate act of retribution.

Goldilocks must have sensed that Siegfried was bent over in laughter, his only regret that he couldn't see it with his own two eyes. He let out a long, deep sigh. But he didn't reprimand his comrade. After all, this *schadenfreude* wasn't completely foreign to him—he would most likely react the same way if Agrippina's cool demeanor was ruined by something similarly embarrassing.

"Anyway," Erich said, "preparations are well underway for you to infiltrate the fringes of Diablo. The Baldur Clan will prepare some fake customers for you. Miss Laurentius is sending over some of her scariest and most tight-lipped members."

"Thanks, that's a big help. Bein' alone... I dunno, I feel antsy. I know I suggested this, and I know Margit's watchin' from afar...but still."

Siegfried realized, now that he was standing alone in this room, that he had never once been completely on his own since he had become an adventurer. From the moment he had kicked the sign to Illfurth on his way out of there, he'd had Kaya by his side. After his first summer in Marsheim, he had met Erich and Margit, and before long they'd started working together. In the past few months, more and more rookies had joined their clan. Siegfried had gotten used to the lively nature of the Fellowship before he had even realized it. He'd forgotten just how quiet it was to be alone in a room. The feelings of loneliness and solitude had squirmed inside his gut, keeping him awake the whole of the first night he had been here.

"You won't be alone for long. I got Nanna to talk to the Heilbronn Familie, and they've managed to secure a little base nearby. I had a look and it wasn't too shabby. Well, some of the floorboards are pretty rotten, so I had to watch my footing..."

"Gotcha. I won't let ya down. But...Clan Laurentius is full of scary-lookin' folk.

They won't look down on me, will they...?"

Siegfried wasn't sure why he found himself venting these stupid, embarrassing worries to the man he still aimed to surpass.

The two of them had threaded out a rough plan before their bar fight, and Siegfried knew that it had been made to be pretty watertight. While undercover, one of Siegfried's jobs was to try to reduce the amount of Kykeon that passed through the hands of Marsheim's citizens by making fake sales to clients who were secretly aligned with the Baldur Clan. On top of that, a number of Laurentius's trusted agents would also pretend to defect from their clan. These independent-minded clan members would make sure he could sleep without fear of being assaulted in the night.

And yet, he was scared of taking on such an important job on his own.

"You don't need to worry about that," Erich said. "They're a tough lot, drawn to Miss Laurentius's warrior's spirit. Aside from the absolute newbies, they can judge a warrior's mettle. I guarantee none of them will underestimate you."

"I guess, but c'mon, you gotta admit they've got looks that'd scare kids. Won't they get mad that they're bein' ordered around by a squirt like me?"

"Well... I can't make any guarantees on that side."

Siegfried felt the weight in his heart lessen from the simple fact that he had someone who would listen to his bellyaching.

Erich caught on to his comrade's uncharacteristic timidity and announced that he would be sending some Fellows to help.

"Huh?" said Siegfried. "You're sending over Gerrit and Karsten?"

"Yeah. Gerrit's a trustworthy lad. Plus he can read, write, and do arithmetic. Like I said yesterday, he was our mole, but he's got a decent education. Karsten thinks quickly on his feet too. They look up to you, so I'm sure they'll be a big help."

Siegfried didn't want to get any of the clan involved and had resolved to go undercover alone. But Erich had realized after Siegfried had gone that it would be weird for the second-in-command, who was so widely loved, to not have

anyone joining his side instead. It didn't take a lot of digging to learn that the adventurer with the scar on his cheek was the "big bro" of all the clan's rookies. It wouldn't make any sense if no one had followed him, in particular no one from the early days of the clan.

"I'm happy for the help, but how'd you convince them to come while keeping the plan secret?"

"I told them where you were in a roundabout way. Basically got them to come to you of their own accord. This isn't my first time getting people to do what I want them to."

Erich had decided that Mathieu and Etan were too honest for their own good, and so he had decided to feed the idea of following Siegfried to Gerrit, who had experience with this sort of thing, and to Karsten, who had learned how to make his way in the world thanks to the general public attitude toward goblins. When they joined up with Siegfried, he would bring them up to speed. Erich was certain that the pair of them would be able to work effectively alongside Siegfried undercover.

"And, thinking in the long term here," Erich said, "I thought it would be better to have a couple of people in on our plan. I mean, they'll help smooth things over when we have to come clean about this when everything's sorted."

"Right. I'll find the right time to fill them in, then."

"Man... Etan and the others are bugging me every day about where their 'bro' has gone. It's been a real headache trying to fake why we fought, you know?"

Their fight had been serious. It wouldn't fly for Erich and Siegfried to come out, arms slung over each other's shoulders, saying that it had been a big ol' prank. The clan would encircle them and beat them half to death, and they would be completely justified to. Almost the entire clan were in the dark, and they genuinely believed that the home they had found for themselves was falling apart.

The strain it was imposing on the clan and everyone's morale was already evident.

Both Erich and Siegfried knew that it was a ticking time bomb waiting to go

off the moment that the Kykeon crisis was safely and sufficiently resolved. Perhaps it wasn't the wisest choice to get someone running on two nights without sleep and someone who constantly had his head in the clouds about how he could be like the heroes he admired to come up with a sober, sensible plan...

"Take it from me," Erich said, "get ready to receive at least one good hit from each of your Fellows."

"Yeah... We're gonna have some apologizin' to do."

The air between them had gotten a bit gloomy, and it was getting late, so Siegfried announced that he would wait until their next communication before dismantling his necklace and slipping it back under his shirt. He tossed the needle and its thread out of the window, and it faded into the darkness of the night. No one would find a single trace of their conversation.

Siegfried battled with the dodgy window for a few minutes, to no avail. He smacked the window frame with a loud *tut*, then headed to bed with his cloak draped over him. He made sure that he had a dagger with him and his sword at the nearest bedpost.

It hadn't been that long since he had bought the bed for his place with Kaya, but he was already missing it. The young hero-hopeful reaffirmed his resolve to draw his mission to a neat and tidy finish before he settled down to sleep.

[Tips] It is well and good to trick your allies in order to trick your foes, but you must be aware of the damage that this will do to the allies that you duped. There are some GMs that have an "if it's interesting, anything goes" attitude, so don't blame them if they start trying to egg on some PvP.

Schnee let out a big feline yawn as she stretched out from her spot on the roof of the Snowy Silverwolf.

The weather was lovely. Perhaps the Sun God was in a good mood, for the late afternoon sun warmed the earth. With His eager anticipation of His wife in the splendor of her autumnal garb, the God of Wind and Clouds had set a temperate breeze in motion—all in all, the perfect weather for a nap.

It had been ten days since Schnee had been ambushed and subsequently hospitalized by her would-be assassins. Yesterday she had become entirely sick of bed rest and had told Kaya that if she didn't get outside soon, she was going to be more algae than person. Schnee had finally won some valuable time outside and was using it to have a sun-kissed nap.

Perhaps thanks to her tougher bubastisian muscles, she found little difficulty in hopping up onto the roof despite not having moved much for days.

"Nee hee, the gods are in Their heaven and this cat's cozy on the roof... How perfect."

Schnee had shed her hospital gown and was perched cross-legged up on the roof. She drew a leg up and began to scratch behind her ear with her hind paw. Obviously she could have used her hand, but the extra power from her legs just made the whole experience that much pleasant. You would be hard-pressed to find a bubastisian who didn't prefer it this way.

"But it still feels a bit weird. Gotta be extra careful not to stretch out my tummy too much..."

A mensch who'd put in equal time in bed would probably have a thousand knots in their neck. Although Schnee wasn't quite so stiff, it troubled her to see that her body didn't feel quite like it usually did.

An informant made their living by chasing leads. Schnee always had to be quick on her feet, and that held just as firm now as it did in her self-described "rumor-peddling" days. Tailing someone or losing someone required quick instincts, especially when she had to work with crowds that would easily overwhelm your average mensch. Every waking hour of the day was supposed to be an opportunity to refine her craft.

Ten days in bed was more than enough to dull her edge. That went extra after Kaya was left with no option but to inject her with a sleeping draft after Schnee's first few escape attempts. As she enjoyed the afternoon sun, an anxiety niggled in the back of her mind—*usually I would've gotten up here fifteen seconds quicker.*

"Now then... How long are ya gonna be spyin' on a gal for? Ya mean to talk to me or am I allowed to get some shut-eye?"

Even if her physical prowess had been dimmed somewhat, her senses had not. Her mind purred on without issue—always kneading away at the intricate tapestry of theories and analysis that drove her work—and she was always aware of the affairs of the person on the far side of the wall, behind the door, or in the garden nearby.

To an onlooker, it might seem like Schnee was muttering to herself, her words lighter than the air, but the recipient knew who she was addressing.

“You spotted me, then, did you, cat?”

“Your blood reekin’ like it does, you just don’t got the savvy to slip past this li’l stray’s sniffer,” Schnee replied. “Aha... You weren’t there in the lot the other day, were ya?”

A figure melted out of the shadow of one of the roof’s small eaves. It was a tall woman bedecked in charming frills and lace.

“Pleasure to meetcha. The name’s Schnee. I’m an informant, though I’m willin’ to bet you knew that already.”

“I have no name to give, but I give my greeting. You deserve it. It is rare indeed for one of my targets to live to see another day.”

Whereas the bubastisian was still sitting casually, her tail swishing, the assassin gave a polite bow. She brought the heels of her boots together—they were awfully tall heels, and Schnee wondered how she had managed to clamber up onto the roof with them—and bowed in a manner usually reserved for men. The strange juxtaposition of this bow with her childish dress and her tall stature conveyed a strange charm.

“You’re quite the brave one, putting yourself out in the open. Surely you’d wish to stay inside, where you can lurk in more *snowy* climes?” the assassin said.

“Wouldja look at that, are ya scared of ol’ John? I thought assassins were pros at killin’ and sneakin’ about!”

Schnee had already built a general profile of her assailants.

It was ridiculous how little of any solidity there was to go on. Rumor

abounded of a pack of fiends in Ende Erde who had miraculously avoided the weight of a bounty on their heads. Just as no one knew the names of Exilrat's leadership, and just as no one had *proof* of Nanna of the Baldur Clan and Stefano of the Heilbronn Familie's brazen misdeeds, so too had this group hidden every trace of their doings.

They were agile and covert, their honed abilities allowing them to not only get the drop on Schnee, but to chase her through Marsheim without losing her once.

This group were unlike any self-proclaimed assassins that you might rub shoulders with for the right price. These were killers so immaculate in their methods that their targets left this world with no sign of foul play whatsoever. They were the mothers of modern death.

Only two kinds of people found their way into a place of such shadowy prestige—the clandestine agents of a truly wealthy noble, and those rare individuals who simply slipped through the cracks in society and come out the other side as predators by necessity, the pressure of absolute desperation revealing their gift for the art of wrongdoing.

Schnee had deduced from what little she'd already known and what formless rumors she could gather to build a picture of the foe before her. Erich would probably have labeled this reasoning with some TRPG term like Bull's-Eye or Information Parsing. Whereas at the table one could pry this information out of their GM with a successful dice roll, the informant had scoured her memories of all she had seen and heard, filtering out the truth from the dross, and had compiled a picture she could trust.

“Oh? I was right? Nee hee hee, every rumor's worth lookin' into, that's for sure.”

The woman in fancy garb huffed in response, as if brushing off a bad joke.

At this rate she'd be left with no reason at all to have shown her hand at this juncture. Schnee did not balk in the slightest. Clearly the informant had formed a stratagem to ensure that even with her death, the wheels would keep on turning. All putting her down would yield was another crime scene to erase.

The assassin knew—Schnee hadn't simply exposed herself on a foolish whim.

She had put herself in the open to lure in her foe and extract intel, even if it meant putting herself into danger.

“Y’know, color me surprised,” Schnee went on. “I never thought you’d show yer face. I figured I wouldn’t see ya again after you did me the favor of jumpin’ me.”

“I am...a gifted assassin, but my primary occupation lies elsewhere. If the need arises, then I may resort to intimidation.”

The assassin moved her arm as if she were swinging a bat, despite her empty hands. As if from nowhere, two wrapped packages appeared and rolled across the roof and into the gutter. From gaps in the cloth, Schnee could see two heads.

“Wowie, what a gift.”

Schnee knew the faces well—they were Viscount Besigheim’s two lackeys that Siegfried had used to begin his investigation into the Kykeon trade.

“I dunno what to say; it’s just so *sudden*, you droppin’ ’em in my lap,” Schnee went on.

“And here I thought I was a little late.”

The assassin would have liked to cluck her tongue in disgust, if she’d been permitted that luxury.

In order to devise an alternative plan, she had bypassed her client and gone to their mutual employer with a handful of complaints. That was all well and good, but the problem was in the delay—their method of communication simply didn’t allow for immediate turnaround, and she had to go through a bevy of long-winded and roundabout channels in order to preserve their information network’s anonymity. She knew that a single hole in their network could result in the utter demise of their organization, but it had been overburdened with schemes and intermediaries.

“So ya came here to silence me ’n’ rack up some brownie points along the way,” Schnee said. “You’re really goin’ out of yer way for yer customer, aren’tcha?”

Schnee swiftly kicked the heads out of the gutter. They traced a beautiful arc in the air before disappearing right into a trash disposal that someone had lazily left open. The unit was filled with various taverns' food waste—mainly leftovers and inedible parts—and the heads would no doubt be lost among them as they were taken away to the compost heap. None would pray for them as they decayed back into the earth.

“My client's pretty impatient, I'm afraid,” Schnee went on. “He's skipped past these fools fer a target with more *meat* on 'em. Bet they told ya not to kill 'em yet. Am I right?”

A brief silence followed. The assassin's face showed no trace of her emotion, but her refusal to answer spoke volumes about her disdain for the limits her organization placed on her freedom of movement.

If it weren't for the shackles of vertical power, the assassin would have dispatched the target she should have been going after the whole time herself. But all of Ende Erde was the field of play for her patron's greater scheme, and so certain pieces had to remain as they were. It wouldn't do to kill any players still in center stage.

They had thought that the adventurers would do what adventurers do best: sit and wait for the optimal moment to act. It was beyond their wildest belief for the enemy group to splinter and probe at their weak spots. The assassin had long questioned what it meant to have the resolve to go out and adventure, but it seemed like she was being shown firsthand the kind of mettle that she thought only the true adventurers from an age long past had.

The contemporary sort of adventurer *should* have been like those who existed in the Age of Gods. They were meant to be steadfast believers in high ideals, driven to act on them even if it meant picking a fight with those in power. A proper adventurer wouldn't hesitate to take more filthy measures if it meant that in the final reckoning, good prevailed.

They were meant to be paragons that dazzled as bright as the Sun God on this warm afternoon.

“Cat... You fed them information. I have done my own digging. The noble houses implicated aren't just the—”

“They aren’t just the three I named, I know. Count Pforzheim and Viscount Liebentwell are marked too, right? But who could tell what a buncha adventurers would do if I told ’em that those two were evil to the core. If I sicced ’em on those too, it’d be no different from how *those two* were treated.”

Schnee gestured to the trash bin with her chin, indicating that this was a question that didn’t need asking. Her ears lay flat on her head—a way of indicating displeasure or wariness. This time it was the former.

An informant dealt in intel that needed to be treated with the utmost caution. Schnee’s own life had been ruined by shoddy intel; she knew firsthand just how important it was to be careful with the cards you have. A single sentence, even a *word* out of place could snowball. You needed to be sure that the person you gave your intel to wasn’t going to run off with it and make a mess.

That Goldilocks Erich wasn’t short-tempered per se, but he relied too much on solving problems with his blade. It was only hearsay, but apparently he had boldly taught his clan members that “at the end of the day, leave no survivors” or “through victory we earn the right to die last.”

Giving up a target to someone like that, who would cut down a villain if it would grease the wheels of the overall campaign, would ruin the tone of the adventure.

“So, what’re you gonna do?” Schnee said. “If ya want my head, I’ll give it up to ya on a plate. Though I doubt me breathin’ at this stage is gonna change much.”

“Tch... You cats are slippery creatures indeed.”

A tut finally emerged from the assassin’s lips.

Schnee hadn’t so much resolved to die. She just knew that her death would result in a net positive eventually.

Indeed, the informant had gone to some lengths to insure against her own demise. The moment of her passing would set wheels in motion to guarantee that she would be an inconvenience well beyond the grave.

There were documents that would be released unless she showed up to her monthly meeting; a safe full of evidence of corruption would be opened if her payments to the Adventurer’s Association suddenly stopped. She had formed

connections with adventurers who shared secrets that would be brought to light in the event that either party should meet an untimely end. All of these measures protected her.

If Schnee had died when she had escaped from the baron's manor, then these probably would not have made much difference. At that time she hadn't had a veritable bomb in her possession that could set Marsheim ablaze.

Now was different. She had sent a number of these "bombs" to various locations that, in the event of her unforeseen death, would cause trouble for not only the local bigwigs but also Margrave Marsheim. Schnee held the fuse, and it was exactly that which kept her safe.

This assassin was smart enough to know she couldn't finish the job anymore.

She had killed countless victims in the past and had never allowed her client to do all the legwork in her research. She made sure to always research her marks personally. Goldilocks's favored ideology of "anything can be solved through violence" had a few exceptions. The assassin had therefore come to Schnee with the proclamation that she had seen through all of their plans, in the hopes she'd intimidate them into inaction. However, now a chain of mutual interests had been formed. It was too late for her to force a chain around Schnee's throat or even a rope around her wrists.

There was nothing more terrifying than someone with nothing left to lose. This rule applied to any and all areas of life.

No, this cat was a step beyond that. She was a thorn in her side she had no choice but to endure.

"Oh? Headin' home?"

"Indeed. I've given you my warning," the assassin replied. "Plus, your attitude has revealed the general scope of your activity. I'll do my own digging with my own two hands."

"Ya sure? Wouldn't hurt ta head back with an extra head in the bag."

As Schnee gave her usual distinctly cattish laugh, the assassin turned away to leave.

It would not do to anger the owner of the Snowy Silverwolf. John was a step below Fidelio in terms of pure power, but many respected adventurers had passed under his roof and his care. His network wasn't to be underestimated—it would take only a single howl to rally the heroes who had journeyed out of Marsheim back to protect their former home. This possibility far outweighed the value of one informant's head.

“Tell the innkeeper I send my regards. And that I didn't break a single roof tile this time.”

“Roger dodger,” Schnee said as she cheerfully waved the assassin off. The woman seemed to vanish into thin air, despite the gaudiness of her garb and Schnee's perceptive acumen. For a short while, Schnee pricked her ears and listened to the faint sounds of the wind and birds, just to confirm that the assassin wasn't coming back. She collapsed backward, the fear that she had been holding down finally welling to the surface.

“Good *golly*... Now that made my fur stand on end... Is that gal really a mensch?”

Bubastisians only had sweat glands on their paw pads; Schnee felt her hands grow itchy with stress sweat. Her mouth was dry from the tension. Her jaw ached.

Schnee had taken painstaking care not to invite the woman to part her head from her shoulders. Of course, she had gone in knowing precisely how vanishingly unlikely it'd been that she wouldn't walk away in one piece, but knowing and being truly prepared were two different things, and her poor heart could tell the difference.

People like that woman—those whose faith in their abilities was truly unshakable—could easily revert into killing machines if it meant reducing the overall hassle they had to put up with. In many cases, it didn't matter what their personal circumstances were—all it took was a single grudge to easily change their mood. They realized that if they simply threw away their morals, their past, their friends, then the murder of a single runt could secure the deaths of hundreds down the line.

“Doin' my research is gonna be a bit trickier now... A wild dog's scary enough,

but she's a bona fide *dire wolf*... Who in blazes coulda put a leash on her?"

Bluffs usually were more effective than money or daggers in drawing out information, but if you played your cards poorly you could end up shaving years off your life. Schnee cursed her foolishness. The assassin's bloodlust had long since faded away, but Schnee's heart was still keeping triple time.

Risk was inherent in a bluff. What you got in exchange for putting your life on the line was solid data. Schnee had held only a scrap of intel, and it might have been the thing that saved her life. She had figured that if the assassin knew John, then she wouldn't do anything illegal while they were on his roof. Choosing to go up here had been a real risk, but it had turned up quite the useful nugget of intel.

"She got lingerin' feelings, maybe? Didn't think she'd still be the sorta person to want to leave a little message for John. I think it might be worth doin' a little nighttime sleuthin'..."

That night Schnee would learn quite the harsh lesson. It was said that a bell on a cat's collar invites danger, but Schnee had failed to notice the invisible, magic string that connected her own neck to the bell at her bedside. Kaya had set it to make sure Schnee got some decent bed rest, and so the curfew-breaking informant had to endure a painful lecture that brought tears to her eyes.

[Tips] Plots and schemes are commonplace in the Empire, and so an assassin often receives specific requests for their work—namely whether it should be carried out in secret or not. There are some cases where the murder need not be hidden. However, there are yet other cases where, for a time, *no one can be allowed to know that anyone died at all*. Such requests come from clients who have their eyes on an inheritance. If they can falsify the date that the person in question died, then they can secure an advantage in the inevitable discussions as to who the most deserving recipient is. In cases such as these, an inability to verify the time of a person's death can have even greater effects than the death in and of itself.

A man entered the warehouse—an individual not even worth naming—and was shocked by what he saw. Who could have guessed that the change would be this quick?

“You’re an hour late. Ain’t ya gonna apologize?” the young man said to the Kykeon supplier.

The one who had spoken was sitting in the middle of the warehouse. The supplier shivered upon seeing his tattered and malnourished appearance. His withered visage illustrated without a doubt that Kykeon was a drug for *selling*, not for using. His clothes were dirty and unwashed; his shoes didn’t match and fit poorly. Ink-black bags sat under his eyes above gaunt cheeks. His drooping eyelids partially covered eyes that glinted with an enervated menace. He had the pallor of a patient in their sickbed.

This was the poor state of one of Marsheim’s latest stars. The supplier felt pity and fear at the poor state that he had fallen to. The warning from the higher-ups to *never* dope up on your own stock had never felt more grave.

“Sorry,” the supplier said. “The patrols have gotten worse recently. Bunch of dealers have been carted off already, so I gotta be careful.”

“Are you pissin’ around? That really a good enough reason to keep me waiting?”

The deleterious effects of Kykeon didn’t stop with the body. It made people impatient, antsy. The man was clutching his knee toward his chest, his leg stick thin. His foot twitched. It was clear that the effects of the drug were wearing away at his mental state.

“Yeah, but like I could’ve done anything! There hasn’t been an official statement to round up the dealers, but more and more adventurers are roaming the streets, y’know? Just like your old pal.”

At these final words, the emaciated young man—the fallen adventurer known as Siegfried—hawked a gob of spit, his nostrils flaring. No, it wasn’t just spit—some undissolved Kykeon was mixed in with the expectoration.

“What the *fuck* does scum-sucking human garbage like *Goldilocks* have to do with our business?”

“All right, all right, I’m sorry. I’ll give you a five percent discount per sheet. We good?”

Siegfried had become one of Marsheim’s Kykeon dealers, but it was clear to this seller that he was on the stuff too. Some of the dealers on the outer edges of the network ended up like Siegfried, but it was a shock to see someone lauded as a local hero fall like this. Siegfried was only one link down the chain, but still the supplier felt smug, momentarily forgetting that he was in the same business.

The supplier hated adventurers. The public fell over one another to fellate them in song and story, all for being more uniquely unemployable than most! To the supplier, they were scarcely any different from the average peddler of their own flesh from the city’s basest brothels.

“The hell do you think I am?” Siegfried said. “Ten percent.”

“Fine, fine. Deal.”

Looking at the fallen adventurer, the seller told himself that this brat had simply run his luck dry in the span of his brief career, however exceptional that luck might have been at one time. Buoyed by this feeling of superiority, he easily accepted Siegfried’s counteroffer.

“My money. Hand it over.”

“Got it...”

A clearly disgruntled goblin wandered over to Siegfried and handed him a heavy looking bag.

“I’ll have to double check the amount,” the supplier said.

“Y’think I’d try and swindle you after this?”

The bag was filled with silver coins. They were scratched and old, meaning they were worth less than their face value, but by the supplier’s count there were enough.

“The money’s clean,” Siegfried went on. “Been through at least two pairs of hands already. You ain’t gotta worry about it being traceable through magic or miracles.”

“Understood. Here—your change from our little discount.”

The supplier gave a satisfied nod, happy that the cash had been sufficiently laundered. If it had been through two intermediary owners, then even if traces of mana or identifying magic still remained, it was impossible to pinpoint the exact purpose for which it had changed hands.

The Kykeon dealers collected far dirtier money than this, but it was better to have laundered money from both an economic and a practical standpoint.

The man didn't bother to disguise his pleasure and clapped his hands together. His subordinate who was waiting out in front brought in some luggage from the cart. Placed before Siegfried was a wicker basket filled with clothes—naturally, the Kykeon was hidden in the sleeves and in a secret compartment.

The supplier had been so distracted by Siegfried's poor and pathetic state that he hadn't cottoned on to the one irregularity in the whole arrangement. This former adventurer was evidently ruined in body and mind by Kykeon, so just how had he managed to secure this much clean money? How had he secured safe dealing spots, sold well above his quota, and avoided capture when there were more searches for the stuff every day? If only he had been a bit less excited at seeing this young man's ruin, he might have realized that a true burnout could never have made such a competent dealer.

That wasn't all the supplier had missed. Drunk on his joy, he didn't notice a shadow up above watching him leave with his money. It was more than likely that he wouldn't even notice the rope around his neck until the last moment.

If you only saw what you wished to see—what others could learn and reproduce at their leisure—then the muddy current of the great game would crush you before it made you clean.

[Tips] In countries with sufficiently advanced magic, simple powders and oils are the most primitive cosmetic solutions on the market.

Siegfried was shocked to realize just how many dunces there were in the world.

The hero-hopeful always sought to better himself, transforming the rumblings of envy into the drive to improve. He was also modestly aware of his limitations, and even if he couldn't list off every single thing that he couldn't do, he did know two things: he wasn't educated, and he didn't have the mental agility to go deep undercover. The majority of the work for his performance as a drugged-out bum was thanks to Kaya's magical makeup, which had rendered him temporarily gaunt and wasted away. His acting skills wouldn't net him a place with even the worst acting troupe.

Siegfried remained on edge for days, wondering if someone would see through his shoddy performance and come to get him. After all, that had been what happened to Schnee. But as the days went by, no assassins came knocking on his door. Instead, he had started to deal with a seller who was even closer to the heart of Kykeon production.

This situation was nothing more than proof to Siegfried that the world was full of shortsighted fools who would ignore what was right in front of their noses if they were making a few coins' worth of profit. As long as he mostly acted how they wanted and expected him to, then even his crappy acting would string along someone with eyes only for money. Still, the realization hardly amounted to much; one fewer idiot was a drop in the bucket.

Siegfried shook his head at yet another successful deal, but he refused to let it get to his head. Just because things were going well now that didn't mean he was confident that he could keep up this ruse. The lad made a mental note to give Goldilocks a knuckle sandwich and make sure he was given a more heroic role to play next time something like this happened.

"Lower it in slowly, all right?" Siegfried said. "Get it wet and it won't be good."

Siegfried and Karsten had carefully removed one of the warehouse's floorboards to reveal an old well. It had been built before this part of town had been integrated within the city walls. The builders of this warehouse didn't need it but couldn't be bothered to do anything about it, and so they'd just covered it up.

The well originally had been dug deep enough to reach the groundwater. With the development of Marsheim's above-and belowground sewage system,

the well had been connected without much thought via a small pipe.

The adventurers were carefully lowering a wooden box filled to the brim with stacks of Kykeon with a piece of rope. Down below a light could be seen faintly flickering—by the way it was moving, the team below were asking Siegfried to lower the box more slowly.

A special unit dispatched from the Baldur Clan were down below. They would handle disposing of the drug. Today Uzu had been personally selected to help and she had crawled through the sewers to secretly neutralize the stock.

Both Siegfried's group and the adventurers down below were wearing miasma-warding bandanas over their noses and mouths in case the fragile Kykeon dissipated into the air somehow.

No one involved needed a taste of this substance to know how deadly and debilitating it was—a simple glance at the junkies around town would tell you all you needed to know. No one would slander another for being too careful with such a substance.

A flickering signal light from Uzu's group told Siegfried that they had safely secured the load. After a few moments, another signal pierced the darkness: Pull the rope.

In return for the Kykeon that Siegfried had managed to secure came another box, nearly identical. The insides were filled with sheets of *fake* Kykeon—counted to match the exact amount that Siegfried had bought.

Most people wouldn't be able to work out the difference between this and the real deal at a glance. They were cut to the exact same size—with the little perforations so that stamp-sized portions could be easily torn off—and colored with the exact same transparent sheen of the original.

Indeed, only those in the know would be able to identify these sheets as the Baldur Clan's substitute. They were a careful combination of the ecstasy-inducing concoctions cooked up by Nanna's despairing brain and Kaya's own makeup potions. Smokestack Nanna's drug didn't provide quite the same pleasure as Kykeon, but it was designed to not be addictive in the slightest. The Baldur Clan were running at a heavy loss to produce this stuff, but that showed just how serious the College dropout's view of the situation was. She had made

exceptions to her usual profit-seeking ways if it meant destroying her competition.

The fake Kykeon provided a momentary high and made the user outwardly *seem* to experience the same wasting effect. No one would think to rifle through Siegfried's stock and claim he was moving bad product.

Even though most of the clientele were plants from allied clans, they *had* been picked for their former addiction to Kykeon. Their own histories would make it even trickier for Diablo to pick up on their counterplot. To any onlooker, it would seem like this fallen adventurer was well and truly a part of Marsheim's drug trade.

The Baldur Clan's drug wasn't illegal on paper, and it was easy to write off the addicts as folk without the fortitude or moral fiber to regulate their intake, but it would still warp your mind and loosen your grip on reality. The young adventurer applied some logic from the battlefield to stanch his guilt, reasoning that a wound from a blade was far preferable to being blown to bits by a deadly spell. All the same, dealing this drug, even if it wasn't Kykeon, left a bitter taste in his mouth.

"Man..." the hero-hopeful muttered. "The Baldur Clan are really flush with cash... How much does it cost to make this much, huh?"

Bought direct from the clan with their crow-and-eyeball seal of authenticity, this same stuff would set you back five librae for a pack. It would bring pleasure to all physical senses for around eight to twelve hours, so it was well worth the price, but this whole operation was eating away at their funds. Siegfried was surprised they could keep up their part of the arrangement, given how costly the production process was in premium catalysts and raw mana.

"Um... Sie... Mister Siegfried?"

"Huh? What's up, messenger girl? That's all, isn't it?"

Siegfried had pulled out some of the cash in the box to keep his funds stocked so that he could continue playing his role. He was sorting through it when Uzu zoomed up the well with her ornithurgy and poked her head out. Her face told of her ongoing insomnia; the bags under her eyes were almost on par with Nanna's. She timidly lifted up an envelope for Siegfried.

The hero-hopeful took it, and immediately the ring on his finger started to shake in reaction to its mana signature. The letter was sealed with a careful formula.

“Again? Seriously?”

“Y-Yes... M-My apologies...”

Uzu gave Siegfried a sorrowful glance as the end of her apology withered to nothing.

Siegfried knew that he was being treated pretty unfairly, all things considered, but compared to him this mage girl was far worse off. As the designated go-between, she was kept on her feet at all times and nagged at every turn for news from the other end of the chain. Not only that, Nanna knew that Uzu couldn't sleep without being doped up, and so she'd *made use* of her insomnia to get her to work for well over two-thirds of the day straight. It was true that the Baldur Clan were a shady lot, and Uzu was hardly exempt, but Siegfried still felt a pang of sympathy for her.

“Our connections have increased, so we've got way more information,” Siegfried said. “You lot can chill out a bit, y'know?”

“I-If she did, then the b-boss would be a p-professor in the capital by now...”

Siegfried noticed that Uzu's eyes, mostly hidden by her bangs, were swimming. Uzu followed Nanna with a blind love, so this was the first time since he'd met her that he'd heard her say something about her boss that could be viewed as having a *touch* of sarcasm in it.

Things were getting heated, and not just Uzu's temper.

Siegfried sighed. There wasn't much for it—he decided to share some of the information he had been sitting on. If he let Uzu return empty-handed, then who knew what would happen to the unfortunate mage. The hero-hopeful wasn't so heartless as to ignore this fact and go about his day without a care.

“Right, so they've got these parties,” he said. “Gatherings to thank their people. There's this one suspicious person there. They've got quite the accent, so Margit and our informant are on the trail for more info.”

“P-Parties to thank their workers? The dealers and suppliers, y-you mean?”

“Yeah. Idiots loosen their lips when you’ve buttered them up and got a few drinks in ’em. We have similar parties with the Fellowship too, y’know?”

Erich had said once that booze was social lubricant. Give someone a big drink on the house, compliment them, and they’ll immediately start to get bigheaded. That went especially for the sort of folk who dirtied their hands in the drug trade. Some people didn’t even *know* what they were meant to keep secret and what they were meant to keep under wraps.

The parties at the Fellowship were also a way for Erich to allow his clan members to make this mistake in a safe environment. It was easy to say things you regretted when you were drunk, so if they made these mistakes with friends first, then they could laugh it off and learn to control their drink next time. Erich had merely been trying to train up the rookies to avoid problems in the future, but Siegfried, who had watched the more naive Fellows from the countryside getting absolutely blackout sozzled, had smartly realized that the practice could be weaponized and turned on their enemies.

Siegfried had asked Kaya to send him over some cash. And so while he drank what amounted to the thinnest possible grog—he hesitated to call it booze, as he had learned what decent stuff tasted like during his time at the Snowy Silverwolf—he plied the idiots there with drinks and soaked up their mindless boasts.

“The people in charge of the suppliers are up to something. I mean, it’s fair enough that there are more people as I’m doin’ well with payin’ ’em, but it looks like the Exilrat are workin’ in the shadows of this operation.”

“Huh? Th-Those shabby fools?”

They must have left some sort of deep emotional scar on Uzu, because she clapped a hand to her nose and mouth. Her hand had gone bone white. Back when Uzu had first crossed paths with Erich on Nanna’s behalf (thanks to Exilrat’s manipulation), he’d arranged a nasty encounter between Uzu and the ground; she could still feel the phantom trickle of blood from the wreck of her nose.

“B-But it’s normal for the Exilrat to work in the shadows...isn’t it?” Uzu said.

“Even some of our s-sellers are...involved with them.”

It was something that Uzu didn't want to say, but it was a fact that the Baldur Clan also employed its share of refugees. Many of the folk that found themselves in the tent grounds were beggars, not adventurers, and their rush mats and baskets were a clear indicator that they were involved with the Baldur Clan.

The Exilrat were known for adding those that came to the Empire in search of a better life to their fold before forcing them into smuggling and other such dirty and unsavory jobs, all for the sake of making quick money.

“They're bein' moved from turf to turf. These are people who can barely even say 'good morning' in Rhinian! If you ask me, something reeks.”

“Yes, but...if you're worried about every little thing, then you'll never stop worrying. They're just as active as the Heilbronn Familie, you know?”

“But that's why I'm suspicious of the increase in these 'good job out there' parties! I've noticed more and more people where I'm based. I remember their faces from back when we started up the Fellowship.”

Shady folk weren't *always* up to no good, but Siegfried wanted to check and make sure.

Indeed, Siegfried had asked Margit to do a bit of sleuthing and found out that Erich had done them in once before—by this point Siegfried had stopped being shocked at the nonsense that turned up in Erich's past—but she'd creased her brow and said that it was unlikely that they would bother them anymore.

All the same, the hero-hopeful named Dirk had grown up poor in the countryside and had never received the kind of education that his three friends did. He had seen a depth and breadth of ignorance in the general population that left him sickened. Naturally he counted his family among that number—his brothers who moaned that they were hungry but never offered to help in another family's field; his idiot dad who wasted his money on drinking and ended up without enough money for decent clothes, come winter.

Siegfried knew that no amount of pain would make a true idiot learn their lesson.

“They don’t get it,” Siegfried said. “Their upbringings were too good.”

Siegfried wasn’t sure exactly why, but assumed that it was because of Erich’s and Margit’s relatively affluent upbringings that they tended to misjudge the brain of the average person. It didn’t make sense to Siegfried. Nobody would bother with war at this point if a simple punch to the face was enough to permanently adjust someone’s attitude.

Or perhaps Goldilocks had simply written off the Exilrat ever since he had crushed them in a previous campaign.

“Some fools won’t learn their lesson until they’re dead and in the ground,” Siegfried went on. “World’s a funny place, ain’t it?”

“I-I see...”

Siegfried handed over his little intel souvenir to the pitiful Uzu and saw her off before covering up the well once more with the floorboard.

Once he brushed the dust and dirt back onto the floorboard, no one would know a well lay underneath.

“Bro?”

“Yeah, Karsten?”

“How long do we have to do this?”

The goblin Karsten, one of the four original rookies of the Fellowship, looked physically pained as he asked the question. Goblins often had many siblings, and so Karsten had developed quite the resilient personality. Erich had also selected him for his aptitude with his blade. But even though he had understood the logic behind this plot, Karsten looked like he hadn’t completely accepted what they were doing.

“What other choice do we got? It’s our home and it’s in trouble.”

“I-I know that, but we’re acting like drug dealers! I... I can’t bear to see you like this, Bro...”

“Nough of that. I told you, didn’t I? I’m the one who suggested this whole damn thing.”

Though they greatly resembled a methuselah's ears, goblin ears were much more flexile and expressive. Karsten's pointed ears drooped in despondency.

"A hero is someone who does the kinda dirty work that no one else wants. Tch... Ticks me off that even that li'l turn of phrase is borrowed from him..."

"Dirty work?"

"Yeah, exactly. Come on—name someone who'd happily do what I'm doin'. I can't even go to the Association and do any jobs! At this rate he's gonna get another rank on me."

"That's what you're worried about?" Karsten mumbled.

Siegfried placed his hand on the goblin's shoulder and put on a wicked grin. No matter how he tried, he couldn't wipe away the boyish naivety from it.

"Listen, Karsten. If you think this is too filthy for ya, then you ain't gonna be able to become like one of the heroes we admire, eh?"

Heroes took on what other people could not or would not do. Heroes shouldered other people's burdens. Anyone would be frightened to stand before a dragon that was tens or hundreds of times your size. The blade in your hand and the skills you honed would feel so dreadfully unfit for the task. But a hero put on a smile and charged forth anyway.

They might not have been fighting a dragon, but their mission now followed the same logic. Their work might never be sung about in public, but they and their allies would be proud.

Siegfried knew that he would never be able to forgive himself if he ran away in Marsheim's hour of need. The young lad's foundations as a worthy adventurer were being hardened with every passing day. He was the sort of person who would look down at his character sheet at the end of the campaign and smile with joy at the numbers listed there. Of course, while Erich dreamed of the highest possible fixed values, Siegfried would drool at the points in his Fame column.

This was the raw and unformed steel that would one day make for the nerves of a true hero. Karsten wanted to show Siegfried—the man he admired, who he treated like a brother—to everyone back in the Fellowship and let them see

how, even done up like a walking corpse, his heroic form held fast. He wanted to tell them: “Our Big Bro Sieg is someone worth putting our lives on the line for.”

“Oh yeah!” Siegfried said. “The letter.”

Completely unaware of how Karsten was looking at him, Siegfried quickly opened up the letter from Nanna. The rainbow-colored smoke that issued forth was vile, but he accepted it, knowing that it was to prevent anyone else from reading it.

He waved away the uncanny melange of primary colors and glanced over the message. The penmanship was skilled, but that made it all the more difficult for Siegfried to read. Many nobles and nobles-to-be never considered that there were those out there that couldn't read as easily as they could. Erich was the same. Siegfried wasn't sure if it was an unintentional habit, but the letters from his friend would often come written in a style intended for nobles that took the countryside lad five times longer than usual to parse.

“Huh? A meeting? In three days? Can't tell if that's soon or a while away...”

Not only that, he didn't understand why he needed such early notice. Was it out of some kind of concern? Who needed this much warning for anything?

“Something's probably goin' down if they want me there so bad.”

It beat the hell out of a note that just read “Come now,” but Siegfried felt that this was a little bit too lax. A farmer liked to solve their tasks the day they cropped up. This whole waiting business didn't feel natural to the former rural lad.

“Tch, this ain't gonna be fun,” Siegfried said. “I hate travelin' in the sewers. There's a bit where you gotta crawl for a good half hour...”

“You mensch are tall after all, Bro.”

“Hey, I'm shorter than average. Heh, you know, I'm jealous of your height, Karsten.”

Siegfried was indeed shorter than the average mensch, possibly thanks to his underfed upbringing. He had tried to eat as much as he could since he'd started

his new career, but it had done little to balance the scales. Goldilocks had consoled him—or maybe this was directed more to himself—by saying that people continued to grow until they were twenty, but Siegfried hadn't grown even a single finger's span since last year. He had given up on ever being tall.

This was the end of his period of long bone growth, and so Siegfried had swept away any false hopes. Still he couldn't help but feel that Karsten's compact frame was more boon than bane.

“Squattin' and crawlin' just ain't good.”

“What do you mean?”

“It makes it hard to judge the distance with your sword. It puts your head farther away from where you need to pool your strength into. If you swing wrong, you could end up cuttin' your own leg. Makes it hard to fight guys like you, Karsten.”

Siegfried merely said what popped into his head. Karsten reached about up to Siegfried's waist, and although he was of average height for a goblin, he was still short compared to most other races.

Since Karsten had chosen to become an adventurer who threw himself into battle, he had trained with his friends in the Fellowship of the Blade. During practice, he would sometimes bend his knees, lowering his height by another fist's width, and this made it difficult for your regular sword fighter to hit him. Indeed, there were stories that some countries' armies fielded goblin soldiers specifically to capitalize on their short stature by crawling under the line of clashing spear walls and slashing at the legs of the enemy vanguard.

“Eh, but there ain't no point in worryin' about what I don't got. I'll man up and do the crawl.”

As Siegfried walked away to burn the letter, muttering to himself the whole while, he didn't know that the goblin behind him was shaking with so much joy it seemed like he had received a gift from heaven itself.

[Tips] The Rhinian alphabet only has twenty-nine letters, but many nobles write in an almost illegible style to make their mail seem more grand and

important.

Autumn of the Seventeenth Year

Connection Creep

The larger the problem, the bigger the circle of connected characters. More people involved can often make the issue somewhat more convoluted. When the PCs' own personal desires and ambitions are involved, the interests of newcomers and oldheads alike come to the fore, resulting in quite the rat's nest. It is the job of the GM to manage this, but sometimes they may find that their reach exceeds their grasp.

In all my years across both my lives, this was the first time attending a meeting fresh out of the bath.

And so, even though the four of us were still slightly flushed from the warmth of the water, we were good and presentable. We might have spent a little too long in the tub, but who could blame us? There isn't a thinking being alive who'd turn down the delights of a *free soak* in one of the Golden Mane's luxurious clawfoot bathtubs.

My partner and I must have spent a solid hour splashing about and humming a little song in the water, but I want to be clear: this was one hundred percent necessary to the day's workflow. I swear I wasn't abusing my power just to finagle us a chance to kick back, okay?

"Now that was the real deal," I said to myself. "No wonder so many of our peers keep spending a night here on their bucket lists."

We had an incredibly important meeting ahead of us, and so I had decided it would be better to scrub up and dress the part. Here I was dressed to the nines in one of the fits I'd come into during my agonizing tours of duty in Berylin with the pervert wraith, Lady Leizniz: a black shirt, a double-button vest with silver stitching, and color-matched skinny pants. I never thought I'd have to put this damn thing on again.

My heart twinged with pain at the fact that it all still fit me. I had still been young when they were tailored, so the sleeves and legs had been tapered slightly, but all it had taken was a little adjustment to make it all sit perfectly well.

A part of me had thought I wouldn't really need them once I became an adventurer, but life had taught me that you should always have one or two sets of smart clothes so you're not caught with your proverbial trousers down in the presence of classy company, seeing as that kind always seemed to find you when you least expected it. I thanked my lucky stars that past me had shown sufficient foresight to leave this set and another in less somber colors in my Konigstuhl cache for easy warp retrieval. If I'd asked a local tailor to design something new of equal measure, who knew just how many drachmae it would set me back?

"What's up, Sieg? Feeling lightheaded? Weird, you weren't in the bath for all that long," I said.

Seeing as Siegfried would also be attending the meeting, I decided to let him borrow my second outfit. I don't think he'd ever been dressed this smart in his life; he looked like one of those miserable cats you see on social media who've been dressed up in little suits and haven't acclimated to being *touched* all over. He was the spitting image of health—Kaya's makeup potion had only been temporary—and Kaya had altered the outfit to make it fit him well. He should have looked the part, but the poor guy was visibly in hell.

"Ngh... Can't...breathe..."

"Collar's too tight? Huh, but Kaya should have made sure it fit, no?"

I could practically see the manga sound effects behind my comrade as he clawed at his neck. Kaya, on the other hand, was giving him a smile. It was the first time in a while that I had seen her so relaxed. The whole time he'd been out on his mission she'd been worried sick about him—I continued to proclaim to her that I deserved as much blame for the whole mess as he did—and had channeled all her anxieties into more potion development. It felt like it had been an age since I had seen her without her brow furrowed.

"Dee's never worn something with a collar before," Kaya told me.

“C-Call...me...Siegfried...”

It was the first time in a while that I had seen this little routine, and despite Siegfried choking through his line, it brought a smile to my face too.

Kaya had a point. I could hardly blame the guy for feeling suffocated in such an unprecedentedly close-fitted getup—never mind the *necktie*.

When I’d gone with Elisa and Mika to see the Berylinian Parade, I’d decided against a necktie in the name of keeping things business casual, but this world’s gold standard for a fully put together ensemble *demand*ed a necktie akin to nineteenth-century Earth’s.

It was the product of the constantly changing fashion in the Empire’s social circles, intended to hide the buttons of a shirt for those people whose status didn’t permit them to wear ruffed collars or other such gaudy accessories. In simple terms, buttons were unseemly, yes, but it wasn’t permitted for someone of servant status to decorate themselves with gems instead.

I didn’t quite get the social mores of the necktie in this world, but I had worn my tie day in and day out back on Earth, so I didn’t really mind. But for a seventeen-year-old farm boy? Well, I’d be clasping at my own neck too.

When Siegfried had first put on the outfit he had left the collar wide open. It was a bad look—this meeting was a situation where, at least in the eyes of the other party, clothes maketh the man—so I had prepared the tie and put it on him. Maybe I’d judged the size of the knot wrong?

“All right, I’ll swap with you,” I said. “This one might be a bit better.”

I freed my comrade from his prison and gave him my bolo tie, which was decorated with a little crystal.

The bolo tie had only come into fashion in the twentieth century back on Earth, but the Empire’s love of showing off gems and metalwork had resulted in its “early” birth here. To be honest, this made a little bit more sense to me than the necktie thing. In general, Rhinians preferred their conspicuous consumption *small and subtle*.

“Damn... I feel like I’m being hanged...” Siegfried muttered.

“This is far better than the kind real nobles wear, you know?” I replied. “And hey, it’s lighter than a helmet, no?”

“Yeah, but I feel trapped, man. A rope around a guy’s neck... I haven’t broken any laws, man.”

The man wasn’t *completely* wrong. Back in my old world, when you were a slave to the wage, it sometimes felt like the necktie was a physical indication of your status as livestock.

I smiled at Siegfried as he stuck his fingers into his collar to try and open some space, despite the looser bolo tie, while I retied the necktie I had taken from him. I had decided to go for a full Windsor with its slightly asymmetrical touch. One of Berylin’s most prominent scumbags had purported the strange ideal that “a dash of asymmetry amid a perfectly symmetrical outfit is *perfection!*” and I found myself even now reproducing the adage without much thought.

I hadn’t really thought about her recently, but just how long was that wraith’s influence going to stick with me? I’d found my way out of the web of power and influence that *thing* had woven to indulge her perverse appetites legally, so why didn’t I feel any more free of her?

“Margit, is it straight?”

“It’s a little off,” my partner replied. “Kneel and I’ll fix it for you.”

Siegfried and I weren’t putting on the ritz all on our own—our scout was serving in her own style with us today. She was wearing a black leather tube top that bared a fair bit of midriff and a short leather skirt which almost showed the join between her human half and her carapace.

I knew that the amount of flesh on display was a consequence of her species-specific distaste for clothes that rustled, but I couldn’t help wondering if this wasn’t just a little bit too revealing for the occasion. In particular, I felt that her brand-new navel piercing was just a little bit too lewd.

Yep, Margit had finally made good on her promise from before. In her own words, it was “a token to celebrate reaching adulthood.” I was the very one who opened the hole, so I knew it best of all. And yes, I realized how bad that sounded the second I said it, so let me be clear: I’m not being euphemistic. I

meant it quite literally—just like with her ear, I had opened the skin for the piercing this time too.

Siegfried had said, “C’mon, do that kinda shit in private,” and gave us a look like he’d just found a steaming dump on the floor, but it wasn’t my fault! This was a touchstone of arachne culture. Not that I could *tell him that*—it was a sensitive topic, not really intended for outsiders.

Whatever the case, here I was on one knee as my bewitching partner—most mensch would probably agree—gently fixed my tie.

“D-Dee!” Kaya squeaked. “H-Hey, Dee! It’s your turn now! I’ll help you too!”

“Whoa! H-Hold it Kaya!” Siegfried said. “Stop shaking me! I ain’t a donkey!”

I could practically hear Kaya’s romantic heart pounding from here at the sight of Margit fixing my tie. Anyone could see that she was over the moon to give it a go herself.



I wondered if she was overcorrecting after Siegfried's long absence. I decided that when this whole Kykeon business was sorted, I would give them a good half month off together. Heroes deserved nothing less.

But first we needed to actually get to the root of this.

"All right, I know we're all having fun, but I think it's about time to get moving," I said after clearing my throat to gather everyone's attention. I led our group out of the guest room we had been given and headed into the private room, situated right at the back of the Golden Mane. I had been here once before, back when I had gathered together the heads of a certain three clans in order to sort out the Exilrat situation.

Flanking the door were two of the inn's burliest bodyguards, swords at their hips. After clocking me, they shared a silent glance, nodded, then gracefully bade us into the room.

"My, my... Someone's dressed up nicely."

"Oho, you look fine in a warrior's attire, but this isn't too bad either."

Two people were already in the private room waiting for us. One was the boss of the Baldur Clan, colossal water pipe in tow as always, and the other was the head of Clan Laurentius, stretched out over a three-seater sofa.

Nanna was dressed in her usual mage's cloak; Laurentius was in her armor. Well, it was no real surprise as ogres wore their armor for weddings, funerals, and everything in between...

"Apologies. We are the newest adventurers among those coming today, yet we have arrived later than both of you," I said.

"Don't sweat it. I'm an early arriver," Laurentius said.

"I merely wished...to check the room's wards..." Nanna said.

It seemed there was no deep meaning behind the leaders of two of Marsheim's most fearsome clans' early arrival. One was a battle junkie who wanted to claim the most advantageous position, or at least wanted to *feel* like she was on top of the game. The latter was raised in the College and lived surrounded by magic, and so considered the advance greetings and paranoid

double-and triple-checking of the venue's magical defenses a matter of course.

They both shared the desire to feel some sense of ease, and so they'd found themselves here thirty minutes before the meeting was due to begin.

"Go on...sit down. The meeting...won't start for a while," Nanna said.

I couldn't help but sense some impatience in the way Nanna was acting. I chalked it up to her irritation that a viable solution for the Kykeon problem still wasn't revealing itself. The intervals between her puffs were shorter than usual. I imagined she was struggling to contain the decaying hellscape within her mind right now.

Today we would hopefully succeed in assuaging some of that worry, if just a bit.

"Oh?" Laurentius said. "You aren't late."

"What a surprise..." Nanna added. "Who would have thought...that the Carcass Splitter would be early?"

"Like I said before, call me that again and I'll end you where you sit, Smokestack."

The next one to enter the room was the head of the Heilbronn Familie: the audhumbla Stefano. He was known for representing one of Marsheim's more bloodthirsty clans, but perhaps he was more a man of reason than he let on—at least, that was what his immaculate fit implied.

I guessed he must not have been used to wearing a doublet, because his chest—decorated with a tusk on a string—was practically struggling to free itself. He must have really worked hard to get into his white trousers, too, because the seams were barely hanging on in their own right.

I was relieved. We weren't the only ones who'd chosen to step up our wardrobe.

"She's right though," Laurentius said. "It's rare to see you early for anything."

"Well, we had some trouble with Kykeon too," Stefano said. "I sorted out some of our affairs with it, enough to settle things a bit. Y'know what they say—parents sleep better when their kid ain't crying through the night."

The room was large and well outfitted for everyone, and so Stefano sat himself down on one of the couches near the center. Us four were the lowest-ranked of all the attendees and so had chosen the least fancy seats. The remaining seats were for the meeting's host and one more. Both were luxurious five-seater sofas. Just looking at them, you could anticipate exactly what sort of people would be sitting there.

One of the inn's attendants brought in some red tea, and we all sat sipping it in silence. Whoever brewed it had *really* known their stuff—another reason adventurers aspired to stay here. In the next moment, everyone with an affinity for magic glanced over at the door.

The owner of the Golden Mane respected the privacy of his clientele and so this room was imbued with various formulae, both inside and out, to prevent sounds from leaking out and the like. Despite all that magical work, we could feel *someone's* presence from the other side of the door.

The furious aura of a true hero passed through layer after layer of insulating barrier and seeped into the reception room.

“Oh...man...” Siegfried said without meaning to. Everyone in the room had reacted to this potent, barely contained killing instinct.

“Wh-What the hell is this?” Siegfried went on. “I ain't ever felt a pressure this strong before...”

My comrade really did have the right stuff. There were two types of frontliners who didn't blanch at this kind of killing intent: the stupid or the truly talented. Siegfried was smart enough to know just how dangerous this sort of aura was.

I hadn't been much different. When I'd told *him* about the meeting today, I felt death flash in my mind's eye.

“The thing is,” I said, “there was someone I hadn't told about the whole Kykeon business because I didn't want to bother him.”

“Huh? There's someone even you're careful around?”

Excuse you, Sieg, I thought. I doubt there's anyone in Marsheim half as self-conscious as I am!

I wanted to quibble with my comrade then and there, but it was true. You see, there was a certain hero in Marsheim I didn't want to bother, especially because he was *about to be a father*.

"Excuse me, all."

His greeting was light and cheerful. So much so that I felt a shiver trickling up my spine. Margit and I were used to his presence; we knew how to take it, but every other adventurer in the room was poised for battle.

Nanna sat stock-still, holding in the last long rip she'd taken. Laurentius had lithely slipped her legs under the table, ready to kick it at any moment. Stefano had reached for the blade hidden in his sleeve, evidently obeying the alarm bells ringing in his head. The room was meant to detect and forbid any secret weapons, so how in the world had he brought that in?

It was no surprise who had come to join us. Here was Marsheim's great hero, the Saintly Scourge of the Limbless Drake: Saint Fidelio. He was still wearing his apron, as if he'd just strolled out of the kitchen.

You heard it here first, folks: Mister Fidelio and Shymar of the Snoozing Kitten were *expecting*. Apparently the kid wasn't planned, but it wasn't *unwanted* either. It had only taken this long thanks to Mister Fidelio's long stretches away from home on his campaigns and the timing of bubastisian heat cycles.

Back when Margit and I used to help around the inn, many of the regulars had thought that they might eventually adopt, considering how long it was taking them to finally get a bun in the oven; needless to say, they were all mooning over the lovely couple now. Mister Fidelio was usually so taciturn and unfathomable, but he practically did a jig on the spot once he knew for sure.

I just couldn't bring myself to ruin this happy scene, and so I'd decided to keep schtum about the Kykeon situation and deal with it on my own time, buuut he had found out. Or, to be more accurate, *someone* had tipped him off.

"Quite the illustrious lineup we've got here," Mister Fidelio said to the dazed audience. It was evident from his aura that he was raring to head out and crush the poor doomed fool who'd pissed all over his parade, if only he knew where they might be. From behind him came a white figure.

It was the informant, Schnee. She had finally been freed from Kaya's mandatory bed rest, but it had taken her only five days to really put her foot in it again.

Siegfried and I had worked hard to compile a lot of vital information, but we were still short on anything definitive to put Diablo in the ground. She had vanished on an info-gathering mission, and not only had she come back with some horrifying intel, she had also put an end to any of the concern I had been showing Mister Fidelio.

It really brought me back to my tabletop days—just how many times had I seen one PC completely ignore another due to their own personal plans? It was weird to be experiencing that here with someone else. I was a fool for thinking that it wouldn't happen to me.

It was true that I had played a few campaigns where a more reconnaissance-minded player had crushed everything in our way to lead us all to a victory that was less a group effort and more their individual one. But I just couldn't believe that Schnee had zero reservations about calling in on a powerful connection that I just didn't want to bother, especially now, of all times.

It wasn't as if I thought we *shouldn't* bring one of our most powerful pieces into play, but I really couldn't believe she had gone over our heads. It felt like I'd been knee-deep in a business trip, when suddenly the manager from the head office came strolling up, having heard that his assistance was needed.

I need you to understand that I *wasn't* annoyed about getting upstaged and denied my time in the spotlight. I just couldn't get on board with pushing someone straight into hell when he had a baby on the way!

Mister Fidelio wasn't the sort of person to knock up a gal and declare that his work here was done. He had made all sorts of preparations for the upcoming birth—gladly reconnecting with an old friend to call in a high-level priest from a Harvest Goddess monastery, talking to his father-in-law about the best place to get some baby clothes made, the list went on.

It seemed that Schnee just didn't really care about such sentimentality. She was the sort of person who waved away the GM's warnings of lost Fame points and a reduced share of the XP, sparing no expense to guarantee the campaign

reached a happy ending.

It had been all too easy for Schnee to bait out the saint's rage on our behalf.

Nanna glared at me with a look that said, *You didn't warn me!* but all I could do was evade her gaze and puff on my pipe as nonchalantly as possible.

Mister Fidelio knew that crushing the Baldur Clan would lead to chaos in Marsheim, and so he'd afforded her a "suspended sentence" of sorts. Still, those two were volatile together; we all knew precisely how little patience he had for everything that fell within the domain of mortal sin in his book, and how far he'd go to see it punished.

All the same, Mister Fidelio had accepted the situation at hand. It was incredibly reassuring to have this Level 15—a bona fide hero-class adventurer—ally with us. I knew he would easily make it through in one piece and get us the win, whatever else it cost us.

"I know I'm the only one who wasn't invited," Mister Fidelio went on, "but it wouldn't be right to not pitch in my own modest strength to the cause when everyone else is working for Marsheim. I realize it's last-minute, but I look forward to working with you all."

Mister Fidelio's genteel and amicable smile was the same as ever, but it didn't reach his eyes. His powerful muscles rippled under his apron, groaning with their desire to be set free, and I could feel a slightly divine aura coming from him.

Was Mister Fidelio's presence here today due to the Sun God's meddling? I doubted it was the God of Trials this time, but considering the recent pregnancy, the culprit could be the Harvest Goddess too. Whatever the case, despite my own personal opinion on involving Mister Fidelio, the gods evidently wanted peace to return to Marsheim. I expected that some of their desire might have come from seeing the child of a veritable hero grow up safe and well.

"Say, Snorrison," Mister Fidelio said. "You're still looking a bit peaky. I would recommend you cut down on the smoking, you know?"

"Yes... You're quite right..." Nanna said. "But please...consider what it's like

for those of us...who can't live without some smoke swirling around their heads..."

"And you, Heilbronn, you seem well, but..."

"Yeah, yeah, I know, Mister Saint," Stefano replied. "But it's gotten better since I took over, no?"

Mister Fidelio's mere presence here had completely changed the atmosphere. I was still leagues away from attaining that sort of skill. His behavior right now seemed to suggest to everyone around him that he was the zenith of modern adventuring spirit, able to quash all wrongdoing with the might of his own party, all while leaving himself the energy to afford the rest of us the time of day.

It felt like we were being rebuked by the God of Trials for not having the power to save one meager city without this man's help.

"Quiet down, everyone."

Another voice blended into the atmosphere controlled by Mister Fidelio. It belonged to neither of the guards outside—too calm, and not nearly bassy enough.

"The manager of Marsheim's Adventurer's Association, Madam Maxine Mia Rehmman, has arrived."

It was the owner of the Golden Mane. By his side was the woman who had organized this meeting: known by the names the Lady of Ash and the Last Ember, she presided over all of Marsheim's adventurers.

Everyone stood up and bowed to the woman who managed every thug and rogue in Ende Erde. Her haggard frame gave her an evanescent aura that overpowered her natural beauty. She seemed even thinner than the last time we'd met. I couldn't fault her for it, really. After seeing what Margit and Schnee had dug up, it was no surprise that she'd only become more stressed out.

"Greetings all," Lady Maxine said. "Be at ease. Let's begin, shall we?"

Despite her appearance, nothing about the way she held herself suggested any weakness whatsoever. Her expression burned with the just desire to

protect her home.

“Now then, it would not suit all of you here for me to waste time going into unnecessary detail, so I shall discuss matters as briefly as possible,” she continued. “All of you are aware of the drug known as Kykeon that has found its way into our community, correct?”

Maxine snapped her fingers. One of her bodyguards, a stout dvergr, placed a cloth-covered tray upon the table. Underneath were sheets of translucent, crystalline paper.

“Erich of Konigstuhl has brought to light a plot to leverage the drug known as Kykeon against Marsheim’s peerage and destabilize the region,” Maxine said.

The salient points were as follows: Kykeon rendered its user useless and doped out, but it wasn’t being sold for a profit. It was created specifically to slowly topple the central nexus of power in Ende Erde: Marsheim. It had been spread around in order to sow distrust among the nobility. Based on the intel we’d gathered, including Siegfried’s work undercover, we’d found out that at least a dozen noble houses had been targeted. Out of this dozen, we had definite proof that several subordinates to these houses were already active participants in the Kykeon trade.

Margit, Siegfried, Kaya, Schnee, and I had compiled every last scrap of dirt on the situation, specifically for this meeting.

Nanna had helped, yes, but she had different skin in the game. She didn’t care about noble scandals; she was just ideologically opposed to Kykeon for falling short of her own standards for brain poison. If we had died and she had survived, then all of the information we had pooled together would have been lost forever.

I was terrified of this prospect, and so I’d worked like a madman with the other four to gather enough intel to formulate a counterplan before it was too late. If we didn’t have a watertight case, then Marsheim’s upper crust would laugh us out of the room, and we’d be remembered as total crackpots for the rest of our days. We had reached the limitations of what could be done aboveboard—hence Siegfried’s fake parting of ways with the Fellowship and his undercover work.

Siegfried had done a bang-up job; he'd managed to find proof of Exilrat's involvement in all this. Margit deserved her share of credit too. She had done all the legwork following them. Naturally we had bundled up this decisive evidence and taken it to Lady Maxine. Unfortunately, that wasn't the end of it.

"This was all very well and good," Lady Maxine went on. "I have discussed matters with the margrave. If we proceed as planned, we can avoid any collateral damage to the innocents in the noble community and purge the lackwits and sluggards who have already succumbed. We would all prefer not to cause any lasting harm to public order."

We had briefed Lady Maxine two days ago. The meeting today was meant to go over everything Lady Maxine had just discussed and angle for help from Mister Fidelio's party in the near future.

But after Exilrat's involvement was made definite, Schnee—who had made a full recovery—had decided to look into a few suspicious characters that Margit had marked for further investigation. What Schnee had found had greatly changed the situation.

"However, we have found something that we simply could not overlook," Maxine said. "Bring it in."

"Yes, ma'am."

Lady Maxine's bodyguard brought in another tray. It was a bit bigger than the previous one and also had a cloth draped over it. Whatever was underneath the cloth was far larger than the previous Kykeon sample.

The dvergr pulled aside the cloth to reveal a huge incense burner, so large that you would have to cradle it in your arms to carry it.

Of course, it wasn't your everyday brazier. The common type of incense burner in the Empire were ash-filled things where you sprinkled incense upon a white-hot piece of charcoal. This onion-shaped device instead used water as its catalyst. In overall functionality, it was perhaps closer to a humidifier—a humidifier conceived for *fiendish ends*.

"What the hell's it do?" Stefano muttered.

"It's a magical tool for spreading infused vapor over a wide area," Lady

Maxine replied. "You put water inside, and the enchantment turns it into steam."

Stefano and Miss Laurentius weren't all that informed when it came to magical matters and simply nodded their heads at the explanation. However, everyone else wore a dark expression.

We had found this thing in pieces. Kaya had assembled it. When she had put it together and realized how it was used, she was almost inconsolable. She fell half into madness and dashed to her workshop, muttering about making an even more potent antimiasma mask for Siegfried, before shutting herself inside.

"The Exilrat smuggled this into Marsheim," Lady Maxine went on. "It was separated into three parts: the lid, the container, and the bottom section. I'm not mistaken, am I, informant?"

"Ya got it to a tee," Schnee replied. "With it all in bits and bobs, people musta thought it was just junk, y'know? It passed through a bunch of hands before endin' up in one of the city's Kykeon dens. Pretty darn roundabout method, if you ask me; I just took it home."

Schnee, who had been standing behind Mister Fidelio, opened up the tool, reasoning that a demonstration was quicker than straight exposition. The top half could be taken off, the middle section had a pipe that nested inside, and the bottom was engraved with the formulae.

Schnee filled the pipe with water and a perfume before reassembling the thing. She flicked a switch on the side, and the contraption chugged to life. In the next moment the room was filled with vapor, completely stealing away our vision.

Stefano started coughing. "The hell is this?!"

"Ugh, it's so *sweet!*" Miss Laurentius shouted. "What's with this smoke?!"

It had taken less than a single breath for the room to be filled with vapor so thick that you could barely see your hand in front of you. Everyone had already inhaled the candy-like fragrance.

The tool's formulae interleaved migration and mutation spells to ensure the vapor would cover as wide an area in as short a span as possible with just a

modest and steady supply of heat.

Schnee had put in a perfumed oil made from sweet legumes—a vanilla fragrance, basically—which had set Stefano and Miss Laurentius coughing. Their palates skewed decidedly spicier than this stuff.

Now then, what would happen if we, say, put Kykeon in here instead of a lovely perfume?

“I hope this has clarified the immediacy and severity of the threat,” Lady Maxine said.

Schnee flicked the switch again, and so the vapor stopped billowing forth in an instant. We all would probably have had to sit with the choking fog for hours still if Nanna hadn’t magicked it away for us.

This was no mere hotboxing device; you could deploy one outdoors and dose a whole crowd. Not only that, Marsheim was built upon a man-made hill. If someone used it at the city’s highest point, then the heavier-than-air cloud would be pulled along by wind and gravity to cover the whole city.

Water vapor was an insidious delivery mechanism for a chemical weapon, especially at our present tech level. You couldn’t board up your windows and expect that to keep the stuff out, and any method that *would* create a proper seal would basically leave you stuck in a cozy coffin. There was nowhere to hide from this thing.

Kykeon was a psychedelic upper that hit *immediately* on exposure; the moment the wave of infused vapor caught you, you could kiss planetary reality goodbye.

What made this whole thing worse was that the weapon’s magic was just the activating agent. Once it had been fired off, the poison cloud would merely move of its own accord. Destroying the source would do nothing to disperse it.

What kind of perverse mind could conceive of something so monstrously inhumane, let alone follow through? The very notion left me feeling despondent before the first shiver of awe at its destructive power ran through me.

“Can’t the nobles hurry up and ban this junk?”

“Not so easy, Heilbronn.”

Lady Maxine didn't blanch in the slightest at the audhumbla's fiery remark. Despite being a mere fraction of his size, she continued to relate the facts in a measured manner.

The long and short: the government couldn't do anything about it at this stage.

Due to how easy it was to hide Kykeon on your person, it was impossible to completely purge it from Marsheim. In addition, it was nigh impossible to verify if other magic tools like this had passed through the city gates. To begin with, it looked like a harmless onion sculpture, and an untrained eye could never determine its purpose from the disparate pieces.

Most importantly, it wouldn't do to suddenly plunge the people of Marsheim into chaos.

“They may be the bulwark of our nation, but they are still people,” Lady Maxine said. “We cannot guarantee that everyone will hold on to a firm sense of reason and act in accordance with our plans.”

It was a sad fact of life that despite the bureaucratic hearts of the Empire's nobles, they were still human beings. Who knew how many would head for the hills when they realized what they were staring down the barrel of?

Unlike us adventurers, if the very people in charge of running our nation were to all jump ship, then the common folk would panic as soon as word got out. If they learned that a deadly mist that would strip them of all sense could come tomorrow, no, *at the next possible moment*, then the city would fall into bedlam as the masses fled en masse—it didn't matter whether their decision was measured or rash.

The local lords would then move in on a newly hollowed-out and undefended Marsheim.

If the Empire wielded its might now, then it would only worsen the situation.

“Of course, we cannot allow Marsheim to succumb,” Lady Maxine continued. “We cannot surrender to anarchy. We cannot permit the city to fall silent, waiting to be seized.”

Diablo had really set up the most diabolical plan I could have imagined. It made Great Britain during the inciting years of the Opium War look positively gentlemanly. Did the people who set this whole thing up not realize the potential fallout?

The Empire's own College was a nest of the most eccentric mages. They wouldn't stop with making a simple antidote; no, they would return the poison with something far worse. "If your enemy should take up a sword against you, seek retribution with a mightier sword." The local lords weren't so ignorant as to be unaware of one of the Empire's favorite slogans.

"This is why I need you to maintain the utmost secrecy as you go about solving this issue. I don't need to explain myself further, do I?"

None in the room dared respond in the negative to Lady Maxine.

We could all see what the future held if we failed. We all had our reasons to dread the outcome. Pardon my rudeness, but even Marsheim's most unsavory clans preferred having a city of any kind to call home. After all, they were the parasites that fed off of it. If the host died, then everything they worked toward would be pointless.

There was no way around the matter.

We were a specially selected squad of adventurers who had answered the call; the only ones capable of bringing things to a peaceful end. This situation was of a kind only seen in the Age of Gods.

"If the government moves into action, many will fall into despair and panic," Lady Maxine said. "What's more, the nobility is too tightly bound by its legal obligations to respond promptly to these conspirators Erich has dubbed 'Diablo.'"

Everyone in the room knew that the hand of the law was mighty but slow. If the target saw it coming, it didn't take a genius to put together that it would be time to skip town.

Dealing with subterfuge demanded a pessimistic outlook—doubly so when you were dealing with an organized group. The local administration had to split its attention between the local lords plotting to usurp it *and* the agenda of a

faceless network hell-bent on burning it to the ground. The worst situation would be for the enemy to self-destruct upon noticing that an escape route was no longer viable, deciding to shed as much blood as possible on its way out.

“One must sort out one’s own problems. That is why I have used my privileges as Association manager to peer into the adventurers’ register.”

Thanks to the discovery of this magical tool, the suspicion that had cloaked the Exilrat had gone from a light gray to a deep black. Lady Maxine had taken this opportunity to leverage her full power to reveal details of the adventurers’ register to me and Schnee—swathes of personal information that in normal circumstances only the Association itself would be privy to.

Thanks to these valuable insights, we were able to pinpoint most of the biggest trade points for Kykeon in Marsheim. By collating and cross-referencing the movement of goods and money, it became clear who was most implicated in this affair.

Most of the landlords who owned the buildings that were being used were in the dark about it all. However, the other half were either connected to the old local lords or were Exilrat members who had only left the clan on paper. Thanks to Siegfried’s own personal connections with dealers and suppliers, we were able to verify the foot traffic in and out of every point of sale. It wasn’t all too difficult.

Long story short, we were ready to cast our net and bring in a massive haul.

“We must act swiftly,” Lady Maxine continued. “We’ll strike them like lightning and end things in one stroke. They must be crushed before even a single lucky fool can scuttle away to freedom. Show them everything you have.”

The manager snapped her fingers, and her dvergr attendant laid out a complete map of Marsheim on the table—a rare item, not often shown to outsiders—as well as the summation of this affair that I’d worked so hard to compile on that corkboard.

I could sense Siegfried’s surprise from here.

I told you we’d need this! I thought. *And here you thought I’d just been strung out on a two-nighter.*

I was genuinely glad that it could come into use now, even if I hadn't actually foreseen this situation.

Lady Maxine continued with her explanation.

"Our targets are these twenty-one people. I want them brought in dead or alive—make sure they do *not* escape. There are thirty-one bases to raid. If we crush them all simultaneously, then the scope of Diablo's abilities will be greatly hindered, no matter how much they try to sustain their covert smuggling operations."

Likeness portraits and ehrengarde pieces were placed onto the map. It really drove home just how big the operation was, seeing all of these faces and bases that we couldn't rat out with the Fellowship's abilities alone. Pooling our forces together had furnished us with mind-boggling manpower. There's no faster way to smash through a challenge than to join forces with your fellow victims.

If the Fellowship had tackled this alone, we could never have hit them all at once. We would have had to set out targets to prioritize and targets to defer when the situation demanded simultaneous victory on every front.

"Damn, that's a lot," Stefano muttered. "Hey, Ember, you didn't plan these raids just 'cause it'd make things easier for *you*, did you?"

He scratched at the root of his horn; the Heilbronn Familie head was plainly shocked by the abundance of targets. His trepidation was natural, given the scale of the affair. Not only that, among the twenty-one were the heads of some notable no-good clans, as well as some nobles that had defected from the Imperial faction. At first glance it looked like Lady Maxine had drawn up her own personal hit list.

"Enough of that nonsense, Stefano," the manager replied. "Look at who I've asked. It isn't a big task if all of you muster your full strength."

Indeed, Lady Maxine had gathered together the absolute minimum required forces to shatter Diablo's structural upper hand. Of course there were people—the Exilrat and even a couple of possible councillors—that the manager would be glad to see gone, but the severity of the situation forbade any purely selfish demands.

“All I wish at this point is to winnow the gap between this meeting and the moment we strike to as thin a margin as possible,” Lady Maxine said. “How many can you ask to join the cause? It is crucial that we move into action all at once and complete the job there and then.”

“Hmm,” Stefano said. “It’s been a bit quiet recently, so give me until dusk and I can rustle up 150 bloody-minded bastards for you. That should handle about ten bases, I guess. I can double that number if you can spare a little longer for me to get the word out.”

The Heilbronn Familie were not a bunch big on high-minded moral practices like “taking prisoners,” so Stefano added that it’d be best if his people were committed against more disposable targets. If push came to shove, then the target base would have to be sorted by his own personal squad or Manfred the Tongue-Splitter—after some explanations, at least.

“I suppose...we would be about...half of that number,” Nanna said. “But we’ll be using magic...without restraint. I’d ask...you to turn a blind eye...if you would.”

“If it doesn’t put the public at risk, I won’t question your methods this time around,” Lady Maxine replied. “Fulfill your task by any means necessary.”

“Wow... That’s quite the relief... Don’t you worry, I’ll make sure they’re captured alive... You can leave...seven of these bases to us.”

Nanna blew out a rainbow-colored smoke ring. It was a wordless message that both her and her clan wouldn’t hesitate to put the full breadth of their alchemical arsenal to work. As I watched the swirling colors of her smoke I recalled that time I had visited the Baldur Clan’s manor and seen her people zonked out, technicolor froth caking their lips.

You just couldn’t top a good *Cloudkill* when it came to AOE combat spells. My previous life had left me intimately familiar with its agonies. They were really potent, but infuriating to deal with when deployed by the GM. Your tanky vanguard? They would all fail their checks in one go. Your squishy rear guard? Gone not long after. What was more unfair was that you remained ever vulnerable while enemies remained ever unaffected, no matter your level. I didn’t want to get started on those boss-level characters that had immunities to

everything...

“I can get forty-one armed and ready at any time,” Miss Laurentius said.

“Laurentius, I appreciate the speed,” Lady Maxine said. “Unfortunately, with everyone else’s schedules, I’d ask you to ready your people by tomorrow morning.”

“All right, in that case I can get you just over seventy. The booze will have run its course by tomorrow. You can leave fifteen bases to us, and you can count on our fighters to understand how to neutralize a foe without killing them.”

I shouldn’t have been surprised, considering she was an ogre, but Miss Laurentius and her clan were *beasts*. Well, when they weren’t looking for solace at the bottoms of their flagons, of course. Some of her regular members could easily strike down three mercenaries on their own in a single exchange. I didn’t doubt that they could conquer these bases without killing anyone.

The members of Clan Laurentius had come together because they adored their leader. Everyone wanted to prove their dedication to her in the field, and so they would be sure to put in good work. Not only that, with Miss Laurentius revitalized once more, they all put in the hours with their noses to the grindstone so that they could sate her craving for combat.

What was less reassuring was the fact that they had zero mages and only a handful of lay priests of the God of Trials.

“We’ll deal with four bases,” Mister Fidelio said with confidence in his voice. Everyone turned to him with a look of surprise on their faces, but his calm expression didn’t change in the slightest. He looked like he had said the most natural thing in the world.

As I thought about it, I realized that, yeah, he probably would be fine. Of course I *knew* that the saint’s party was composed of veritable heroes, but the truth hit different thrust in front of me like this. One base per person was quite something. A well-armed group of twenty would struggle tackling three bases; two would be a more realistic number. But his party was made of sterner stuff.

They had Mister Fidelio, an invincible frontliner who could buff and heal himself; Mister Hansel, the unsinkable powerhouse who’d taken on the poison

of a fallen serpent god with no issue; Mister Rotaru, an assassin so adept that even Margit couldn't track him; and Miss Zaynab, who could neutralize dozens without even setting a foot inside the building.

It would be *unfair* to pit the four of them all together against a single target. Our own party had a similar formation, but they were on a completely different level. The GM hadn't yet shouted at us to rein things in, and so they'd only really thrown enemies that were about our level at us so far.

"Oh, I'm happy with the biggest base," Mister Fidelio added. "Don't you worry. No matter what happens, the flames of the Sun shall burn it all to dust."

What made things way more unfair was that Mister Fidelio wasn't just a physical warrior: he could also call on his faith to summon fire. Most parties had a keystone member, without whom the whole formation fell apart; his, to the world's chagrin, could stand on their own individually as tremendous hazards to life and limb.

"Many apologies, but we only have twenty people to field," I said. "I suppose we could handle two bases."

I was the modest newbie here. I needed to give an equally modest estimate. Our core members had improved a lot over the course of the summer, and Siegfried had also gotten used to leading people; we would have no issues if we split our clan into two groups. If I was being honest, we were pretty much obliged to give some of the bigger targets a wide berth, given that part of our objective was to make sure nobody fled the scene.

"Very well," Lady Maxine said. "The Association will also be sending its own forces. On a tactical level, it would make sense for people from the Heilbronn Familie and the Baldur Clan to join them, so please spare a few dozen. You're up for the task, aren't you, Hubertus?"

"Of course, ma'am," replied her bodyguard.

As soon as I heard the name, a shiver ran through me. This dvergr serving the Association manager was *the* Hubertus the Deranged?! He was a living hero who was on the same level as Saint Fidelio or Manfred the Tongue-Splitter! He had been offered knighthood as recompense for his work as an adventurer, but he had turned it down of his own free will, earning his epithet.

Judging by the atmosphere, perhaps he, unlike me, didn't simply enjoy adventures, and instead he and the manager had... *No, no, stop that—such speculation is below you, Erich!*

"I'll divide up the bases," Lady Maxine went on. "An aide will deliver notices before long."

"That's all well and good," Nanna said, "but what about...the sewers?"

By only telling us where we would be attacking just beforehand, we could reduce any possible damage even if there happened to be a spy for Diablo lurking undercover. Everyone was aware of this and would take sufficient measures, but Nanna's concerns lay elsewhere—with the network of paths that lay beneath our city.

Marsheim's sewers were not as well maintained or guarded as the ones in the capital, and so it ended up being the nesting place for the homeless and those who wanted to conduct their affairs out of sight of the law. Just like the hideout that Siegfried had been using, hidden routes like old derelict wells provided the perfect escape route. Of course, you would have to crawl through filth that you couldn't be sure was mud or feces, but it beat dying.

"You don't need to worry about that," Lady Maxine said. "I've used my connections and requested that a branch office of the College run a 'full examination' of the waterways. It will be carried out at the same time as your jobs."

"Aha..." Nanna replied. "You're using the slimes...to block the paths... How clever..."

Lady Maxine hadn't overlooked a single detail. Marsheim's share of the calved-off daughter-clones of Berylin's "Presidents of Pollution" would have every angle covered.

The College was a huge organization and the Empire was vast, so they had a number of branch offices around the country. They were kind of like branch schools, really, and were set up to make sure infrastructure continued running and to collect data from around the Empire. Full-time magia often found themselves working in places like these instead of the College.

In some regions where they had promising mages but couldn't afford to send them out to the capital, some of these offices leaned more into the educational facet of their role. Specially nominated tutors were sent from private schools, yes, but the most important implication of these branch offices was that there'd always be a magus within reach.

If Lady Maxine had secured such help, then the slimes—who only roamed a small section of the sewers to conserve their energy—would be flushed through the whole system to give it a full clean. This would make the sewers a no-man's-land. Not even a mouse—no, a *flea*—would be able to escape the slimes. Anyone foolish enough to jump in there to plot their escape, would find themselves dissolved by the alkaloid tide, not even leaving their bones to mark where they fell.

I was impressed with the level of bureaucratic power that Lady Maxine could bring to bear. It was one thing to realize you *needed* a magia's support, and another, far greater task entirely to coax one into doing what you wanted. Lady Maxine wasn't merely the previous margrave's illicit child, nor was she simply the current margrave's older half sister—she was a brutally intelligent woman. That made her terrifying.

When I'd turned down her offer of peerage, maybe I shouldn't have brushed her off so strongly. Maybe it would have been better to win her favor and add her to my connections column...

"I realize that some of you might have some qualms or your own ideas about this whole affair," Lady Maxine said. "But this is for the benefit of all of Marsheim—where each of you have chosen to call home. This matter will be resolved in utmost secrecy; you will not be praised for your deeds in public, nor will you receive evaluation from the Association. I am afraid your only reward will be in coin."

"I have no qualms if I am given food, drink, and a place to battle," said Miss Laurentius. "I would say that most everyone here would prefer money and the safety of their city instead of glory, no?"

After Miss Laurentius's question, everyone voiced their assent.

Mister Fidelio was fighting for his wife and their inn.

Nanna was fighting to destroy her ideologically abhorrent competition.

Stefano was fighting for his turf.

Siegfried and I—well, our reasons were pretty obvious by now.

It was simple, really. Everyone had their own line drawn in the sand which marked where their values lay. Life was defined by the struggle between those whose lines were mutually exclusive, between whom there could be no coexistence, save the coexistence between conqueror and conquered. Whether one resorted to bare blades or not, this was an adventurer's way.

If we saw a little extra scratch in exchange for keeping our digs clean, so much the better. Honors weren't unwelcome, but they didn't amount to much if you couldn't keep your house in order and your nose clean.

"Very well," Lady Maxine said. "I will expect you all to fight well. You are dismissed."

After the manager's solemn final words, my fellow adventurers made their way out of the room. They had preparations to make, after all.

We too would be going out to rally our troops...but first we had a little explaining to do. The fight between Siegfried and I had been decided more on a whim than with any concrete awareness of the consequences, and so we had inadvertently caused a lot more pain for our Fellows than we had intended. We were both pretty disheartened at what was to come, but had resolved to receive a good punch from everyone as penance for what we'd done.

If I was being totally honest, I was a bit jealous of how much everyone admired Siegfried. This experience had taught me that I would never have been able to form the Fellowship of the Blade alone—maybe I would've only been able to scabble together about half of our current number. If *both* leaders of our precious Fellows had pulled such a prank in ill taste, then I envisioned a bloodier scene today than what would come tomorrow.

As I decided that I would start off with an honest and direct, "I'm sorry," Lady Maxine called out to me.

"Erich, a word please."

“Yes?”

Siegfried stopped and glanced over at me with a look of confusion, but Kaya and Margit read the room and pushed him out. With the door closed, Lady Maxine indicated that I sit opposite her. I knew that I had foisted quite the volatile load onto her lap, but I didn't think it was fair to receive a personal lecture about it. If I hadn't done anything, then who knows what state Marsheim would be in right now?

“I have an order for you...” Lady Maxine said. “No, it would be more fitting to call it a request. Don't die tomorrow.”

“I had no intention of it,” I replied.

My words came a beat late. I'd almost embarrassed myself by blurting out, “You *what?*”

I was a swordsman heading into a kill-or-be-killed situation. That meant that I would make decent preparations to minimize the chance of me falling in battle. However, with the situation as it was, I couldn't help but feel uneasy that she was so direct in this request.

In our circle, no amount of preparation could guarantee you'd walk out in one piece; if your number was up, that was it. This whole Kykeon business was especially dangerous. Who knew when a cloud of vaporized poison could come from the sky to wipe you out, leading to the Bad End before the truth could be brought to light?

But if you asked me, with our upcoming full-scale raid tomorrow morning, it was Diablo that had fumbled their save. There was a one-in-eight chance that a hero-class adventurer would come knocking on one of their warehouses, ready to pulverize everyone inside before they could even rattle off a predeath haiku.

“It is thanks to your efforts that Marsheim's most prominent clans have come together to deal with this situation, despite everything.”

“All I did was ask for help because, as much as I am loath to admit it, I lack the ability to solve it on my own.”

I wasn't putting on false modesty. The scope of our problem was far out of one person's or even my clan's ability to bring it to a safe and happy conclusion.

Our enemy was neither flawless nor invincible, so there probably was another route available to us, but I decided that if we were the main cast of this campaign, we were obliged to take the requisite measures.

The only thing that had surprised me was Schnee's move to bring Mister Fidelio into this, but I had accepted it by now. There was nothing more uncool than a pack of fledgling adventurers letting the world end because they wanted to test their skills and grow from it. Marsheim had many heroes it could count on. If I were the GM in this case, I would flip out at my PCs and ask why they were pooling together so many NPCs against me. It was getting so bloated that I would be thinking about tagging in a co-GM.

We adventurers weren't at fault, though. The gods of creation had built a world of monstrous complexity and didn't seem to regret it one jot.

"That's a great feat in and of itself. You are protecting Marsheim and what it stands for."

"I'm not quite so sure. All I had thought was that if this situation goes badly, then how would I be able to remain an adventurer here in Ende Erde?"

The Empire's western frontier had so many adventurers because it wasn't a completely safe place to be. Although the Empire's influence was here, they still hadn't managed to achieve complete law and order. I sensed that if Marsheim fell and all of Ende Erde was enveloped by chaos, then the whole direction of the campaign would shift. It would turn into a veritable war game. I was happy with leaving this genre at the table—I didn't want to witness that kind of hell firsthand.

"I would have thought that measures were being taken because His Imperial Majesty is concerned about his people here in Ende Erde," I said.

"I do not believe that is the case," Lady Maxine replied. "There are more than you think who would not subscribe to that way of thinking either."

The woman whose hair was probably more gray than black at this point let out a long, deep sigh. In that moment, she seemed even smaller than before.

"The Heilbronn Familie has improved since Stefano took over," Lady Maxine said. "Even still, they are a group of barbaric thugs. I expect they would switch

sides if they thought it would be the more expedient means to protect their turf.”

“He doesn’t seem so coldhearted to me...”

“I aided in his usurpation, so I have won his obedience in this case, but the older members within his clan are most likely not staying quiet.”

The Heilbronn Familie might have been adventurers, but at heart they still bore the long history of organized crime in Ende Erde within them. They were happy to live as they always had, as long as the administrative powers left them be.

Stefano was comparatively young and had won his leadership by killing the previous head in cold blood. His incredible might allowed him to maintain his hegemony, but the fact of the matter was that the clan still housed many old-timers—hot-blooded warrior types. They might have been bothersome for Stefano to control and deal with, but the clan would cease to exist without them. It wouldn’t do for Stefano to act like a certain brush-bearded fellow who had eliminated the majority of his army all for the sake of stabilizing his hold on the power structure beneath him.

The Heilbronn Familie were feared for their power and violence, but they were not an all-powerful singularity.

I was surprised with how Lady Maxine had just casually mentioned that she was involved with Stefano’s rise to power. I didn’t really want to dig into the nitty-gritty of her involvement there. I was certain as soon as I probed the matter, I’d receive a dozen dirty requests as a result.

I understood the logic behind her decision. If there was something foul but you weren’t able to destroy or simply leave it, then all that was left was to engineer the best compromise you could stand.

“The Baldur Clan can’t be trusted either. Nanna is here due to her own personal moral compass. If she found something to swing her the other way, then I am sure she wouldn’t mind seeing Marsheim burn,” Lady Maxine went on.

“If she were offered the option to continue her research elsewhere or given

even higher privileges than now, then she wouldn't hesitate to take it up..."

"You have a keen eye. She settled here because it fit her needs at the time. Although she has clawed her way up to the position of a clan leader, she has no love for this city."

The College dropout, whose pet hellscape only grew ever larger, saw Kykeon as a crime against good taste, fit only to be expunged. However, her rage was founded on an alien set of personal standards.

This was only speaking in hypotheticals, but if those sheets of translucent paper housed a drug that angered her less, would she be working this earnestly right now? Who could tell—maybe Diablo would try to reach a compromise by telling her that they would halt production of Kykeon and instead work together to create something that fit her ideals.

Nanna said that there was no better place for research than the College. I could tell that she was far from satisfied with her current output or the research funds that came from them. If a research facility abroad of comparable quality to the College offered her a position, then she might bring her whole clan in on the plot. She was pouring her efforts into filling a bowl with a hole in the bottom, and I doubted that she minded what measures were necessary to refill it.

"I suppose the only half-reasonable group is Clan Laurentius," said Lady Maxine. "But you and I both know that ogres tend to fall victim to their whims. No one can tell what they would do if it meant satisfying their hunger for battle. Anything could happen."

"Right..." I said. "If it meant fighting a worthy opponent, they could be compelled to switch sides. It's not unheard of."

Miss Laurentius proclaimed that her battle lust was relatively low compared to other ogres, but from what Ebbo, Kevin, and some of the other old guard of Clan Laurentius told me, she was prone to blood-drunk conduct in the field. She had put a target on me to sate her cravings and was working on improving herself once more, but I wondered what would happen if she found a truly worthy foe here on Marsheim's side?

It was a situation that our good rapport had been won by upping our

friendship meter, but one false step could make her Diablo's mercenary, still blazing with the urge to battle me or Mister Fidelio to the death.

It sounded ridiculous, but that was just how ogres were. Because it was rare for a worthy foe to be born outside of their race, they had at one time been terrible enemies to one another. The ogres had then banded into tribes, which had then in turn resulted in all-out war and the subsequent extinction of a number of these groups. The history of ogrekind was painted in blood; knowing this, it was easy to imagine someone turning coat just to sate their desire for battle.

"Finally, there's Fidelio," Lady Maxine said. "It's true that we have owed one another countless favors, but...he has no love for the government."

I could only hold my silence here. He was a powerhouse of an individual and an upright person, but that meant that he didn't really understand the heart of the common person who lived day to day. This wasn't to say that he didn't think of them at all. But when it came to making concessions with one's enemy in order to minimize loss of life, he would never, *ever* choose the path where his suffering would benefit his enemy.

It wasn't that he *couldn't*—he merely chose not to.

It didn't matter if we found out that the leader of Diablo was someone who should be kept alive for political reasons. The saint would continue in his righteous rampage, offering no quarter to a bald-faced sinner.

The Baldur Clan toed the line of what the saint could bear, but Mister Fidelio wasn't going to show any mercy in the Kykeon crisis. Especially now, of all times. He was more on edge than a lion protecting its cub. Limp logic like "this will result in fewer deaths in the long run" wouldn't sway him now.

"He isn't a bad person, but he is utterly useless in political matters. In fact, I've been avoiding him. I'd felt it would be better to not associate with him."

Lady Maxine's brow furrowed. I was surprised to hear such a thing straight from her lips.

"One thing I would like to clarify is that I wasn't unaware of the plot going on in Marsheim," she continued. "But I never saw it so clearly as you did; certainly

not enough to think to give it a name.”

“In other words,” I said, “you left the discretion to us, despite the danger it might pose?”

“That goes without saying. If I knew nothing about this plot, then I would have to live the rest of my life with a board around my neck that said ‘utter dunce.’”

Lady Maxine was a manager of adventurers. As evidenced by Hubertus the Deranged, she had a number of loyal pawns under her control, so it was complete nonsense to think that she had been sitting on her hands this whole time. This was a realm that I wasn’t privy to understanding—Marsheim’s political situation was a huge mess—where something had rendered her unable to act openly to resolve the Kykeon issue.

“But thanks to your initiative, you created an opening that allowed me to be involved. Legitimacy and reason are important values even among your own.”

“Yes... I suppose that no one wants to be looked on with suspicion when they’ve done nothing wrong...”

I hated this web of expectations—these unspoken laws that dictated what you could and could not do. I understood why it was necessary, but it just ticked me off on an emotional level.

We adventurers could eliminate a terrifying foe and bring things to a happy ending, simple as pie, but that didn’t fly for people bound by their social standing. If some idiot who didn’t know the situation came along and said, “Huh? You acted of your own accord without consulting anyone? That’s illegal, no?” then you would have far bigger things to worry about than the issue you were previously trying to solve.

Those in power naturally had an equally large responsibility, but no one wanted to end up causing their own early retirement.

“That’s why I ask that you do not die. If we lose you, this alliance goes with you. My biggest worry is that the enemy will seek to target you first or drive you apart somehow.”

“I suppose if I’m the clasp holding us together, then that means I should act with a bit more panache, to prove my ability to hold my own.”

“I would call you less of a clasp...more of a clamp.”

Now that was quite the compliment.

I had merely been trying my best to get along with my fellow adventurer while squirming my way into bringing this situation to an effective and efficient end. But to be told “You’re important” by someone as impressive as Lady Maxine didn’t feel all too bad actually. My grandma had told me to make sure I received as much pocket money and as many compliments for my achievements as I could in life.

“Then I’ll do my part in forming the wall that will keep Marsheim safe. Safety here enables me to adventure farther afield, after all.”

It wasn’t completely my style, but why not show off a little?

“I’m counting on you to fight well and return alive. I am not the only one who has seen just how important you are.”

“I will take on the honor of the task and enter the battle with your words fully in mind. You can look forward to a positive report tomorrow.”

I gave my best and coolest smile before leaving the room.

Why didn’t I pick up on what Lady Maxine was really saying back then? In hindsight, if I were the most important part of our alliance, then that also meant that I was the weak point. People in my circle—no, most people nowadays call that a “flag.”

[Tips] Although adventurers often align themselves with the affairs of their country, they are not reliant on their nation. To put it bluntly, there are many adventurers who don’t actually care who is in power as long as they are free to live their lives.

“I’m so glad! I’m so happy!”

“Big Bro! I believed in you, Bro!”

As two men, both a whole head taller than him, cried tears of joy as they held him in a tight embrace, Siegfried wondered if he might have preferred getting

held down and beat senseless the way he'd expected.

When he had come clean about his performance—something that he still didn't believe was all too convincing—to his Fellows, he had been ready for fists, bootheels, or even knives to come his way, but instead he'd received warm embraces and hot tears.

"I tricked all of you for Marsheim," Siegfried had said. "I've been dishonest, and it's your right to make me pay for it."

He was about to go into a whole spiel about how he would understand if they needed to get their frustration out through their fists, but then Mathieu—the werewolf and one of the founding members of the clan—swallowed him up in a big embrace. Siegfried was known for his agility, able to spring away at any moment in battle, but Mathieu's embrace was too quick for the hero-hopeful to even try to escape.

A thick arm twisted around his neck and the musky, sweaty smell of Mathieu's fur and clothes filled his nostrils.

"Ohhh, Bro! You're back, Big Bro Sieg!"

The next impact that came only a beat later was Etan—an audhumbla and fellow member of the Fellowship's old guard. He too bent down and embraced the clan's second-in-command with outstanding speed. No, it would be more correct to say that the pair currently held him in an inescapable bear hug.

"Ngh... S-Stop that!" Siegfried said, forcing the words out. "L-Look out!"

The comparatively small hero-hopeful twisted about, flailing for safe footing. His foot came hard down on the floor of the clan's rented room in the Snowy Silverwolf before crashing straight through the floorboard.

It was no surprise, really. Both Mathieu and Etan measured around two meters. Not only that, Etan was heavily built, alone weighing way over three hundred and thirty pounds. Siegfried had the grit to bear all that power and joie de vivre without being crushed to bits; the floor wasn't quite so tough.

"We're g-gonna...faaaaall?!"

The brave floorboard was hanging on, despite Siegfried's foot stuck in it, until

a bunch of other Fellows joined the scrum. It gave in, letting loose a deafening *crash*. Siegfried, who had been trying to escape, found himself halfway in the floor. Now trapped, he could only let the dogpile wash over him.

Erich thought for a moment that his comrade had died in the crush—Etan and Mathieu alone could easily pulp a man between their pecs if they tried—but he breathed a sigh of relief as he saw a limb wriggle free and heard his friend’s infuriated shout. The clan leader considered lending a hand, but decided to leave them be.

“They really do love our second-in-command...”

Erich had outstretched a hand, ready to break up the scrum, but brought it to his head. He started to brush his golden namesake. From his eyes, it was plain to see the pangs of jealousy he felt at seeing how *easily* his friend came to be loved by so many.

“It’s because Big Bro Siegfried is so casual around us. It makes it easy for us to tease him back.”

The one who had spoken was Gerrit, who’d returned to the Snowy Silverwolf before Erich’s meeting with Maxine had ended. He hadn’t only been helping Siegfried on his undercover mission. He’d been occupied with work that only he could do.

Firstly, he’d been sent to ally with his father and convince people that the Fellowship of the Blade was a boon to Marsheim’s nobility before anyone could start spreading any dirty rumors. Erich didn’t have any kind of powerful political backing here in Marsheim, and so Gerrit’s familial connections were key in securing the kind of support the Fellowship needed. These connections would play a key role in the raids tomorrow. Maxine had also explained the situation, and so the guards would turn a blind eye to any acts of barbarity committed by a certain handful of clans. Even if their prescribed targets screamed and asked for help as they fled the scene, none would aid them—even as a knife was plunged into their back.

If you were going to impinge on someone else’s rights, then you needed to butter up those that had the power to ignore your misdeeds. Erich had picked his jobs until now quite carefully for the express purpose of accumulating

political favor, to be called in at a moment like this.

This time, Erich had Gerrit, who felt like he owed his boss a favor. Gerrit had been terrified of being cast adrift without a job or place to be. Now he wouldn't hesitate to pull some strings to shut the mouths of the captain of the guard or of the elite squadron.

Along with that, Gerrit was as compassionate as he was well-connected. While Erich and the other three were in their meeting, he'd preemptively told the Fellowship about his situation and helped to redirect some of their ire toward him instead.

Erich had told Gerrit countless times that he wasn't a bad person for being a spy, but the young man couldn't help but paint himself in a negative light. For this naive son of a noble, faking his name and reporting about his boss behind his back was nothing less than high treason.

Yet none of the Fellows had been mad. In fact, they'd reacted much like Erich had, realizing that little harm had been done by this illegitimate noble son's sneaking about. After all, Gerrit had eaten at the same table, tasted the same experiences as the rest of them, and had made it through brutal training that seemed worse than death itself. They had seen blood and death on the battlefield together. These shared experiences had made the clan more empathetic to their Fellow; they'd been kind and said how cruel it was for his father to put him up to such a heartless, thankless job.

"Oh?" Erich said. "Am I really that unapproachable?"

Maybe it was because Gerrit was such an honest and straightforward sort that he tried to respond to this curveball that Erich had thrown. Normal people would regard Erich's catty remark as a bit irritating, or perhaps even an abuse of power.

"Uh, well, how do I put this..." Gerrit replied. "I feel that you command...a lot of our respect."

"Well, judging from our backgrounds, I think you're far more worthy of respect," Erich said. "You have noble roots! I'm merely a born and bred farmer's boy. And, hey, we're not that different in age!"

No matter how boyish a grin Erich could give, the fact was that he had acquired a roster of permanently active traits that made him taxing to be near. This was compounded by his powerful sword skills that would allow him to cut down anyone in the room with ease.

It was true that the rookies also got beaten up by Siegfried during training, but their second-in-command wasn't as *flawless* as Erich was. Siegfried inspired a sense of kinship before respect.

The pair were like a wild dog and a wolf. A wild dog was dangerous, but it was still a dog, so you might think it was cute. A wolf, on the other hand, was fundamentally dangerous—there were probably few people who would rub a wolf's belly if one dropped to the ground and rolled onto its back.

“And I might have a bit more experience with my blade, but I've only been an adventurer for just over a year!” Erich continued.

Goldilocks had once more forgotten the consequences of his build—even now he was still considering purchasing Absolute Charisma—and told Gerrit that he wouldn't mind slinging shoulders with him. All without the awareness of just how much courage it would take anyone to *do* that.

“Uhh, umm, well, I, how do I put this...”

At his core, Erich's sentiments hadn't changed much from his previous life. He had spent a whole lifetime with his friends at the table, and even as he was acting out that beloved hobby for real, these experiences would never truly disappear from his memory. He loved that easy mood among college friends where you could talk as much shit about one another as you liked—as long as it never crossed the line, of course.

Naturally, the sad truth was that there was no way that the experiences in a fictitious TRPG campaign could ever truly map onto the real experience. In this life, your wounds from training took days to heal and each meal was your reward for surviving a battle you fought tooth and nail to survive. Although Erich had asked his Fellow to banter with him with the same ease as he did during that beloved hobby of his past life, evidently it wasn't so easy.

“Graaah! Enough of that! Who the hell decided I needed to build up my resistance to being crushed to death?!”

The sound of flesh striking flesh saved Gerrit from the awkward situation. Siegfried had finally resorted to more physical measures after deciding he'd had enough of being squished.

Siegfried used his knees and elbows to get in good hits to avoid any unnecessary pain—to himself, of course—as he fought his way to freedom. When he finally stood up, he looked utterly exhausted. So much so that he wasn't sure if this had proved to be a more taxing endeavor than actually being beaten up by his Fellows. He was like a cat who had been played with by a bunch of children that didn't yet know the meaning of restraint. His shirt was pulled down past his shoulder, and his hair, which was scruffy to begin with, was tousled beyond compare. Upon his cheek were the beginnings of a bruise, left by a collision with someone's shoulder on the way down.

“I thought I was gonna suffocate!” Siegfried yelled.

“But Bro... We were just so happy...!”

Siegfried had forced all the perpetrators onto their knees, but it was evident from their faces just how overwhelmed and overjoyed they were at Siegfried's return. They loved the Fellowship not just because of *one* of their two leaders; they loved the banter *between* Erich and Siegfried, the earnest training they received from the *two of them*. It wasn't because they got them good jobs or had connections to decent clients, but because of the sheer fun of their mentors' dynamic. If they were here, then none would regret giving up their youths to blood and mud, even if a death in battle awaited them at the end.

It had been this love that had made seeing Siegfried and Erich beat each other up before their second-in-command lost his soul to Kykeon too much for them to bear. If this situation had continued for even half a month longer, the Fellows would surely have lost a fair bit of their roster to resignation after teary resignation.

“Dammit, I really am sorry! It was my dumb idea and I'm sorry! But please, guys, stop cryin' already! Oh, and we're gonna have to cough up some cash to fix the floor. I'll pay half and you guys can cover the rest, so please!”

“Oh, Bro!”

“Hee hee, you look so happy, Dee,” Kaya said. She was able to see the smile

playing on her partner's lips as he switched from apologizing to lecturing.

"Oy, Kaya! Enough of that!"

"Dee was lonely too, you know?" Kaya went on regardless. "He always looks so happy when he's training and working with all of you."

"C-cut that out!"

This was probably the biggest reason all the Fellows looked up to Siegfried—whenever he was with them, he just looked so *happy*. Just like how a moody and snappy boss made you feel equally depressed, working under someone who took real pleasure in the labor with you made you feel affection for them.

"Ohh, Bro!"

"Grah, hold it right there, Etan! You're bein' way too intense!" Siegfried snapped. "And you, Mathieu! Don't you dare stand up, or I'll whup you again!"

Siegfried returned the affection he gave with kindness in equal measure. If someone was worried about something, he'd furrow his brow in concern or offer to drink away their woes beside them.

Erich, on the other hand, was not only a skilled swordsman, but he never let his mask slip. No matter how many pints he pushed back, he would look completely fine, with that easy grin always on his lips. His air was somewhat aloof—distant maybe—and although that inspired the clan's absolute faith and trust in him, it made it hard for his Fellows to open their hearts to him in the same way. It was easier to relate to someone if you could see at least one flaw.

"Oh! Big Sis Kaya, I've got a question I've had for a while," Martyn said, raising his hand, while Etan and Mathieu went to give Siegfried some more bear hugs. "You always call our big bro 'Dee.' Is that some kind of nickname or something? Boss taught me some easy words to read and write and I noticed that the word 'Siegfried' doesn't have anything like 'Dee' in it at all. Is it maybe an Orisons-based name?"

Maybe the easy atmosphere Siegfried's return had brewed had allowed Martyn to ask this question that had been playing on his mind for a while. The hero-hopeful froze in the midst of kicking Mathieu away and pushing Etan's mighty snout out of his personal space. His face was filled with shock, perhaps

at the fact that it had taken until now for anyone to ask.

“Hee hee, well, you see, it was a man called ‘Dirk’ who asked me to come on an adventure with him,” Kaya said.

“Huh? But...I thought it was Bro who asked you to come with him, Sis?”

“Oh man, they’re going there, and she’s actually gonna tell them... And now, of all times,” Erich said. He placed a hand on his forehead and looked up at the ceiling. He had tried so hard to deflect the topic whenever it had come up, hoping to ensure no one cottoned onto the link between “Dee” and “Siegfried.”

Maybe Erich was at fault for wanting to give them an education. Martyn had been hard at work learning to read and write with the earnest desire to support Erich with administrative tasks, but the color drained from his face as he realized he had asked something that maybe shouldn’t have been asked.

“C’mon Kaya, I tell you this all the time! Call me Siegfried! Or at least Sieg!”

“No way,” Kaya replied. “I don’t know anyone by that name!”



With the blood completely drained from his face, Siegfried begged Kaya, but the herbalist merely brushed him off with a teasing smile.

This was most likely Kaya's revenge for her partner's foolish decision to plunge himself into the lion's den without her.

Men had the tendency to get so drunk on the prospect of adventure that they'd forget the things promised to those dearest to them. Kaya had left her family behind and covered herself in soot to be with him. How could he have forgotten such a thing?

"So... Big Bro Siegfried isn't called Siegfried at all?" Karsten said.

"No way... I thought Big Bro had some noble blood in him or something!" Gerrit added.

Neither of them could hide their surprise. Gerrit in particular thought that Siegfried might have been in a similar situation to his own. After all, it wasn't the best name to give to a farmer's son.

"Okay, then... Big Bro Dee it is, I guess?"

"Yeah, rolls off the tongue better than Big Bro Sieg!"

"I mean, c'mon, Sieg means 'victory,' right? It's a bit on the nose, huh?"

"Bastards the lot of you!" Siegfried roared at his chattering Fellows. "It's *Siegfried*! Call me Siegfried!"

The Fellowship's second-in-command fought to try and maintain the image of a cool adventurer he was working toward, but the damage had already been done.

That night, there were no drinks or speeches—the next day would be a workday, after all—but they whiled away the hours teasing Big Bro Dee, overjoyed at his return.

[Tips] Affection is an emotion usually only reserved for those who are of the same standing as you.

I suddenly found myself remembering an idea called “Surprise Ninja.” Simply put, a director from my old world had advised that if your script would be made more exciting if a surprise ninja burst in and killed everyone, then your script needed work.

You might wonder why I’d be thinking about something like that at a time like this; reader, understand that at that very moment, I was fighting a decidedly unfigurative surprise ninja of my own.

Running on no sleep, we had made our way to our target location an hour before dawn, scoped out the perimeter, and waited in the early morning light until it was time to spring into action. To be honest, I had a bad feeling the whole morning. In my mind I was shouting, “Open up! This is the MPD!” as I kicked down the door. I had barely set foot inside before we were ambushed from above.

It was so out of the blue that I was dazed for just a moment. If it weren’t for Permanent Battlefield, the black-cloaked figure hurtling toward me from the rafters in perfect silence would have parted my head from my shoulders with their wicked dagger before I could form a thought.

The room was dark and the light coming in through the door barely reached inside. I couldn’t make out my assailant’s face. But the chill down my spine told me that another fatal blow was coming.

“Missed, huh?!” they spat.

I blocked their blade with *Schutzwolfe*, but couldn’t disarm them. My opponent registered my guard and eased out of their follow-through with astounding speed, barring me from creating any space between us.

The rule of surprise dictated that a second attack was no longer an ambush, but I’d have preferred it if they got out of my face!

“YAAAAH!”

They’re quick! They didn’t step forward; instead they twisted at the hips to go for a heavy thrust I was certain would kill if it connected. I didn’t know if the enemy had placed them there, but there were two stacks of wooden boxes by the doorway that reached up to the ceiling, shutting out any attempt to juke

left or right. I couldn't head back through the doorway, lest I embroil my Fellows in this assault. And with my would-be killer in the way, I couldn't even push forward. They had cut off almost every move available to me.

Damn, they're no amateur. They know just how to put a bug up a swordsman's ass!

"Erich?!" came a call from behind me.

"Margit, fall back with our Fellows!" I shouted. "They're too strong!"

The next blow came for my neck—straight for the gap in my armor. I couldn't deflect this with my gauntlet. My arm was already bent, so on pure instinct I brought my sword's hilt to bear, deflecting their attack into the upper left corner of my helm to soak the blow. I'd managed to turn a killing blow into a glancing one, but the tug on the strings tied under my jaw told me that they had managed to scrape off a whole chunk of my helmet.

What's more, I *still* couldn't do anything about the distance between us. I was stuck in super close quarters—unable to move or swing my sword properly.

My sword grip also felt odd in my hand. The wood covering its core was *melting off*. Most likely my foe was packing some kind of acid or virulent toxin. I could write off any defensive strategy involving sacrificing a less vital hit location to tank the next attack. Our resident healer wasn't with us today—Kaya was with Siegfried's group.

As soon as the poison entered my bloodstream, I would be stuck in this stalemate until it wore me out from within. In other words, if I was going to break out of this surprise hell scenario, I'd have to resort to an ace in the hole.

Bring it on, then!

"Hm?"

My opponent's low grunt betrayed their surprise. Anyone would be caught off guard, seeing their swordsman opponent charge forward after *dropping his sword*. I'd cast it aside with such confidence that it seemed to indicate that all I needed to do was avoid one more hit.

I blocked the right-handed spear-hand strikes that were being sent my way

with my left gauntlet and drew my fey karambit into my other hand using my cheapest Unseen Hand variant. I was hesitant to rely on it, as its range was short and its ability to cut through armor would make my sword skills rust, but in quarters close enough for me to identify my enemy's cologne preferences, this wicked little thing could beat any sword of mine hands down.

My heavy thrust aimed to gouge right through the enemy's jaw seemed like it would seal the deal...but it didn't strike true. I had dropped my sword to make them *think* I was going to enter a desperate wrestling match with my assailant, but they saw through my bluff and blocked the attack. They'd spread their hand so that my blade passed through their middle and ring fingers, catching my incoming fist easily.

My leather glove and the gauntlet that protected the back of my hand started to hiss as they melted. *Poison here too?* I wasn't sure if they had doused their own glove or if it was secreted from their very hands, but it was potent stuff if it could chew through hardened leather *and* metal!

Although it was dark and their cloak made their face hard to see, I could tell that they were a regular humanfolk, if on the tall side. I might not have been the tallest soldier, but as long as they didn't have the sort of power to crush me into mincemeat as soon as they looked at me, then I shouldn't have been at too much of a disadvantage in a knock-down, drag-out fight...

Ah!

Something bad was coming. Enough battles nearly to the death had taught me the warning signs—if I pushed, I'd be a goner. It practically had a signature stench.

I had sensed a huge whirl of mana. It wasn't being let out; the assassin was threading it together *inside* their body.

I was about to kick up my knee to push the fist holding my fey knife clear, but instinctually I released the tension in my body. My form crumbled. The assassin had clenched harder on my right hand in a bid to twist it apart. My body tensed up again, and I used that sudden push of energy to try to pin them down.

In the next moment, the assassin dropped their dagger and thrust their left hand toward my neck. I jerked my jaw away and angled my neck guard and

helm so that my weak points were out of reach. The assassin must have twigged that they wouldn't be able to deliver the final blow like this, and so they suddenly grabbed at my collar.

I felt weightless. I was already in the air when I realized I had been thrown. I had been launched into an empty storage room, deeper in the building.

What power! I had worked hard to improve my own strength through my Hybrid Sword Arts and wrestling practice, but I didn't even have the time to *react*! I wasn't tall by any means, but I was fully decked out in armor; I couldn't have been less than a hundred and eighty pounds! Just how strong *were* they, if they could huck me in an arc that cleared twice my own height?

The spell she had cast must have buffed her physical might. If it hadn't, then that meant this woman had pulled off such a feat through *sheer brawn*. A crack of sunlight had finally caught her in the light—she was a tall and slender woman in a girlish dress that felt charmingly out of place. If she managed this on pure physical prowess alone, then she must have been somebody with Divine-level skills equal to my own!

Oh, this ain't it! This isn't the kind of enemy you throw out against someone doing a bit of errand work! Who the hell sent her?!

I wasn't just stuck airborne and helpless; I was under an assault from all angles. I could barely sense the killing intent, but it was still there. Four crossbow bolts and garrote wire from below, two projectiles from above.

There was no way I had forgotten this formation and their distinctly rotten vibes. The assassins who had almost killed Schnee had come for me now. What splendid luck I had to meet them here, right when I was all alone! They must have forced me apart from my crew to create the perfect moment to eliminate me without any interruption.

I couldn't even manage a chuckle. What had I done?! Yes, I might have helped thread together a plan that would incinerate all of Diablo's bases, but I was positively cuddly compared to some of the other anything-goes-style adventurers!

Even with Lightning Reflexes stretching out my perception of time, I couldn't afford to hash out my complaints in my head. I needed to get a little serious

here, or it would be the end of the road.

I twisted in midair. With my feet toward the ceiling, I activated my Unseen Hands. Pushing off from a makeshift platform, I managed to clear the barrage just in time. I figured my foes hadn't expected that I could correct course in the air, but all the same, they were too clever and I was too unlucky for them to have caught one another in their full lines of fire.

I landed hands-first and rolled into a quick somersault as I hit the ground to keep my momentum. As soon as I was on my feet again, I was running full tilt.

I was bearing down on the source of that volley of crossbow bolts. *I know who you are—you're the vierman*, I thought. Even with four hands, they still needed time to reload!

Twenty paces in and I was upon them. I let out a powerful strike to their cloaked head, preventing them from even reaching for their weapon. This assassin must have had melee skills too; they dropped their crossbows and tried to square up, but they were too late. I caught them in their soft, unprotected jaw with a gauntleted fist. I felt their teeth give and fragment through the layers of leather, metal, and unfamiliar flesh.

The vierman fell backward. I wanted to follow up, but I was in no position to be greedy. As if launched from a catapult, a small figure sped toward me, their dagger held in both hands and leveled straight for my throat.

I used the momentum from my right jab to pull back with my left arm into a half-turn. My body ducked under the blow, my head kept firmly upon my shoulders. My foe registered the dodge, but I grabbed at their cloak as they passed by.

"So light..." I muttered to myself.

I used the little assassin's momentum against them and hurled them at the kaggen that was gunning straight for me. Two pained grunts sounded at once.

I was well aware of the extra damage caused when two objects collided while they were *both* accelerating. Although the assassin I'd launched was only half my height, they had almost been a blur as they came rocketing toward me. It had been an easy feat to knock the kaggen straight out of her pounce with all

that momentum.

Unfortunately, I was still surrounded, and I *still* hadn't removed a single assassin from play yet.

Ugh, talk about a hit to the ol' ego... I got rid of my sword and I still haven't racked up one kill.

To top it off, when I'd slugged the vierman, I had heard the sound of the crates stacked up near the entrance crashing down. My ambusher had sealed off the entranceway to bar the way for any backup. This had bought them a ton of time—I would be on my own until Margit circled around and found another position to provide fire support from.

Adventurers worked as a unit by nature. Our work obliged us to pick fights with foes outside our weight class, and in the absence of a real force multiplier, we had to rely on the inherent advantage of numbers in the action economy. But here I was, alone against five assailants, each with enough strength to tank a single attack from me.

“Quite impressive,” the woman who had been the first to attack me said. “It has been quite a while since our formation has failed to kill our target. You're starting to shake my faith in myself.”

I still didn't want to show my entire hand, so I drew my emergency dagger from my waist. The woman in the dress brushed off the dust and remains of the boxes from her gloves as she approached me. It was clear that she wanted to buy some time to let her allies regroup.

Grr... I hated to answer the duel, but I steadied my breathing and readied my blade.

“But I haven't come away from our little skirmish empty-handed,” she went on. “You are no mere swordsman, are you?”

As she walked toward me, clacking her heels with such intensity that I couldn't believe how well she'd suppressed her presence before the ambush—when Margit had tried to suss out the presence of anyone inside, she'd said she could only sense the people sleeping upstairs—I finally realized that she was a mensch.

I had seen her dress earlier, but now that I got a better look at her I was quite surprised by her fashion sense. She was wearing Gothic Lolita fashion with long gloves, knee-high boots, a lily of the valley tattoo on her cheek, and poofy bangs that wouldn't look out of place on a trendy guy in a fashion magazine. The image was so intense that it took my brain a few beats to process what I was looking at.

“Your methods are rather similar to mine,” she went on. “You appear to merely *use* magic, not devote your studies to it.”

“Who could say?” I replied. “I'm just a Renaissance man. I make it a point to learn every lesson that comes my way.”

I could sense mana waves coming from her again.

Gods dammit... It was as she said; we were of a similar breed: lightweight fighters who buffed up their skills with magic. Unlike me, she was a brawler. I admired them, but they were a pain to deal with. They pooled all their stats into a narrow set of specialties to put an unhinged amount of power behind each blow. Having allied myself with a number of them in my previous life, I could say with certainty that I was pretty familiar with the temperament.

This didn't just come from me comparing the real world to some game systems that I was particularly fond of. I could *feel* the mana flowing through her and those expensive but plain gloves when she threw me earlier.

The lily of the valley was a perfect simile for her own pretty appearance combined with her fatal poison. Deadly fists and deadly venom—a package of pure bloodlust. To top it off, her appearance suggested that she would gouge away until the job was done.

Now then, what to do? The cloaked small figure and the kaggen had finally untangled themselves and were finding their footing. Behind me, I could hear the sound of the vierman spitting out blood and a tooth. *Hold on*—looking back at the small figure, I noticed that their hood had come off. I could finally see what was underneath: two pointy ears and a rabbit face. They were a hlessi—a race gifted with bursts of incredible speed and agility. That explained their cannonball-like charge earlier.

Finally, there was the one who'd tried to entangle me in her “garrotte wire”—

the huntsman arachne.

Each of these races were extremely powerful in their own ways, each endowed with uniquely deadly traits. If I'd had the chance to be reborn as something other than a mensch, then I would have carefully considered each of these among my options.

"Whatever the case, it matters not," the mensch woman said. "I'm sorry, but you will be dying today. No matter what."

"I've received such invitations many times before, although maybe not quite so explicitly phrased," I said.

I put on a brave front, but this woman oozed danger. To be honest, she was pretty damn frightening. Not only was she difficult for me to fight, I wasn't even sure if I *could* kill her in a one-on-one matchup—even with a no-holds-barred strategy.

The meaning behind Lady Agrippina's warning to me before I left Berylin passed through my mind: a mage needed to make sure that their spells killed as soon as, or preferably *before*, the enemy clocked them. It didn't just go for me—I was probably only scratching the surface of what this mensch woman could do. Maybe her strategy had been to get me scared and paranoid of her poisonous hands. A mage slowed their foes down by getting them caught up in maybes, ifs, and but-what-abouts. In this regard, the woman had scored an A-plus.

I started to wonder about her choice of clothes, gaudy tattoos, piercings... Were they all specifically chosen to distract her enemies and confer an advantage in her own battles and negotiations? This woman's build was designed to not only give her immense physical power, but also to let her creep around in the shadows. She was not to be trifled with.

All right, then. This isn't working. I need to change tack.

"If you think I'll go down so easily, then I need to get you to reconsider your estimation of me," I said.

With the scene so drastically different from my expectations, I could practically see the GM's intense stare which said: *Abandon your mission and*

focus on getting out of there alive!

It would take a while for my backup to arrive. I wasn't capable of eliminating all five of these assassins without suffering immense damage myself. I could tell that this was just the GM's own little show: *Take a look at these boss-level enemies I've prepared for you.*

Of course, I knew better than to assume such benign intentions on my GM's part; this crew was *out for blood*. But these idle thoughts of mine kept my brain's heat gauge clear. If this were the table, then I probably *would* throw myself into the fight, just to reward the hard work that had gone into cooking up such a compelling death squad.

Only yesterday, Lady Maxine had warned me that my death would be the worst possible outcome for our alliance. Today's citywide base-crushing would end successfully, but without me to keep everyone together, the mission would stall in the aftermath.

I imagined that my lineup of enemies had acted out of their usual remit in order to plot this ambush. Any penalties would probably be offset if they brought my head back on a platter. Above all else, if we wanted the win, I had to survive. I just needed to bail without incurring any wounds that would prevent my return to the battlefield.

I heard the sound of scraping metal. The vierman was getting up, and as they readied their weapon, they must have removed some kind of attachment.

The second round had begun.

The first attack came in the form of a metal stake about as thick as my finger piercing the air. It resembled the throwing nails that ninjas used, and was launched by today's very own surprise ninja.

She was incredibly fast. This was proof enough that her mobility stats far outclassed mine, able to outpace me and attack immediately after setting up. Not only that, if I didn't have Lightning Reflexes, I wouldn't have spotted the second stake hiding in the trajectory of the first. I couldn't forget that despite her dabbling in magic, she was a brawler with abilities that outpaced those seen at the table. I had vague memories that fighters from a certain TRPG lost the ability to throw projectiles after the release of a new edition. They helped to

dull the fear in my mind as I dropped clear of the first stake. The second careened straight for my leg so I simply deflected it with my dagger.

In a crouch, I pushed from the ground and faced my left, in the direction of the closest way out...before turning away and dashing deeper into the warehouse.

“So that’s your game!” the mensch woman shouted.

My primary objective was to not die, but I couldn’t let these monsters tail me taking the quickest route outside. If I chose the wrong egress, then I might accidentally lead all of my Fellows into early graves. They were putting in the hours to come into their own as sword fighters, but they didn’t stand a chance against such unfair odds.

All I had done was to bring together rookies with whom I wanted to adventure. We were allies; I didn’t want them to become my personal meat shields. I would be ashamed as their leader to bring their stories to an early end by dragging them into the lion’s den with me.

I’d decided that I would escape through the back. There had to be a window or door right at the far end. If I reached it, I could claw my way to safety.

Judging by their formation and their methods, I imagined that these assassins favored subtlety. They wouldn’t want a laundry list of witnesses to eliminate, so if I made it to the street outside, I figured my odds were good that I’d be in the clear.

I was not keen on fighting in a dark, enclosed space—their obvious preferred stalking grounds. If they were craving a slugfest, then I would draw them to the base nearby, where Siegfried’s unit was probably well underway cleaning up, and take them down with our full force.

You wouldn’t catch me fighting an enemy when they had such a transparent upper hand and a clear path to their strategic goals. A killing blow was only a safe bet when you could overtake your prey with overwhelming speed and force, or else wear them down and shut them out from every avenue of escape. If you played into their hands, then your loss would be only more absolute.

Ehrengarde worked on similar principles. If you kept playing half-baked

moves, your formation would be worn down before you knew it. Eventually you would reach a point where no amount of struggle would bring you back to the path to recovery.

I needed to prioritize survival. It annoyed me, but if the choice was to go down valiantly while taking down two of their number or to scamper off with my tail between my legs, then the latter was far preferable to the former.

“Got you!” I said.

“Huh?!” came the reply.

But if I was going to make it, I couldn't keep playing coy about my tool kit. I used my space-time magic to summon back the projectile that I'd just deflected and used it to stop that hlessi in their tracks. Thanks to my timing, I'd made it look like I'd simply caught and redirected the projectile.

My enemy was struck in midair. It must have quite literally added insult to injury for them to take the same hit I'd managed to evade in an impossible quirk of fate. Still, even though I'd forced them into a bit of a corner by shutting down their offense, they were still an extremely mobile threat. Even dashing at my full speed with no intent to fight, they could easily catch up with me.

Fifty paces remained until I reached the far end of the warehouse. Running through the maze of haphazardly placed boxes and bags just about tripled the actual length of the route. What stressed me out was that I could sense my foes rushing toward me *in a straight line*.

I heard the sudden keening of a sharp edge slicing through the air. It was the kaggen, soaring toward my blind spot as they ignored the difficult terrain separating us.

Their shearing limbs were spread open—looking like they were ready to give what would be my last hug on this earth. It was a courageous pose to strike, betraying the confidence they had in their ability to take a blow. As I watched their not insubstantially charming face close in, it felt like I was playing first victim in a horror flick.

Before I met a grisly end, I leaped up onto a wooden crate before kicking off from another one off at an angle from the first—my crude approximation of a

good old-fashioned triangle jump. A single moment of hesitation would send me crashing back down to the ground, but this was one of the few key tactics to liberate a mensch from their two-dimensional constraints.

My opponents made a living attacking their targets without being seen. They researched their opponents—to a fault. I was a mensch, therefore I would only move on the ground; this assumption was their downfall. The kaggen's attempt to block me off was terrifying, made even more so by their form and their grotesque three-part rage grimace, but it'd take more than my full complement of armor to keep someone like me from making the occasional airborne maneuver.

“Ah!”

They went whizzing past me down below. A momentary flash of greed urged me to stamp on their head as they went by, but I decided to play it safe. Letting my desire to show off and get the win anyway would totally scupper my getaway plan.

“Blood 'n' thunder!” I sputtered.

Seeking my next foothold—at this point, leaping between these boxed stepping stones was a faster way of getting away—I cast my gaze all around me and saw the beginnings of a horribly deadly attack coming my way. I quickly unleashed my Unseen Hands and yanked at my collar, putting on the emergency brakes. The whiplash hurt my neck a bit, but it beat the hell out of the alternative.

The vierman had readied a gargantuan bow that they needed two hands to steady and two hands to draw. There was practically zero lag between the sound of the arrow being loosed and it barely grazing me. In the next moment, I heard the deafening sound of it crashing through the back wall of the warehouse. Arrows were *not* supposed to fly that fast!

If I had chosen to deflect it, it would have smashed right through.

What the hell was with that stupidly big bow?! It was taller than your average mensch and about as thick as my forearm. No normal person should be able to even draw that!

I wondered what tricks they had pulled on the arrow too. Usually one made affordances for concerns like gravity and air resistance when creating bows and other projectile weapons, but despite the vierman being 150 paces away, their arrow had flown perfectly straight. I wasn't sure if it was magic or a miracle, but something must have been done to let it ignore the laws of nature and fly like a rifle bullet. If I had decided to get in that extra hit on the kaggen, I would've been shish-kebabbed. I could tell from the angle of their attack that they'd known the arrow wouldn't slow down, even if it had to bulldoze through some of these crates to get at me.

That was too close. I knew this was life-and-death, but the bloodlust from this lot was off the charts. What the hell were pros like these doing messing around with the drug trade?!

I continued my escape, keeping an eye out for a second sniper shot, but somehow the arachne had gotten the jump on me. This huntsman arachne could move far quicker than their size suggested. Arachne were arachne no matter their size, it seemed.

All the same, I wanted to believe that they had moved at max speed to pull off this end run. If not, then it was just *unfair* that they could do this when I had to sacrifice any major action to push my movement and *still* end up slower than them.

Now that I was closer, I could finally tell that my glimmer of hope wasn't a window but a door. The poor lighting and the cluttered layout had made it difficult to make out, but my earlier checks had told me that an escape route was guaranteed. I'd been wise to look ahead.

Unfortunately for them, I wasn't heading out that way!

With only ten paces left until I reached the end of the room, I readied my dagger in a reverse grip, and suddenly I felt the weight of tremendous killing intent. There shouldn't have been anyone behind me, but still I felt it suddenly gush forth. This wasn't good—I was just readying myself to smash right through the wall!

The mensch woman laughed. "What an interesting hand you've been hiding!"

It was as if she had materialized out of the shadows. The goth woman loomed

close enough to strike me.

How strange, I thought. She had moved into action first, but I had started moving before anyone else. How had she got the jump on me when she'd been so far behind? Maybe she had used space-time magic? No, I would have felt the stench of the mana it took to do that—the fabric of reality produced a telltale metaphysical “odor” when it was tampered with. The likeliest option was that she had used a catalyst to swap places with something.

“The shadows!” I said.

The pitch-black of her cloak was too deep for simple shadowy camouflage. Whether she was operating under the veil of night or in the nooks and crannies behind objects, a slightly more navy tone would be far more appropriate than black. Under the light of the full moon, truly black clothes would stand out. There was another, deeper reason she had chosen this color.

“Seems you have a few brain cells knocking around in there after all!”

She gave me a toothy, terrifying grin, the flash of her canines bringing to mind a starving hound.

Her clothes looked as if they'd materialized out of the shadows themselves. I had thought that the style had just been a product of the sort of singular taste in fashion typical of adventurers, but this fit of hers actually shored up her whole build. On top of giving the impression that she was tough and not to be messed with, it allowed her formulae to manifest more easily. I was dealing with an extremely *old-school* mage. At the College, there'd been a number of fallen bloodlines known for berating the current trends in magic for a perceived lack of elegance or grace; this made me realize that they weren't talking out of their asses—the material gains one could reap from keeping it classy were incredible.

If you described the fundamentals of this lightning-fast shadow-based movement in a thesis, you could probably see yourself reaching professorship before long.

“If you don't show me everything you can do,” the woman said, “I'll crush you, you light-addicted woolgatherer!”



She didn't hesitate to unleash a flurry of full-power blows, mixing in spear-hand finger jabs and punches seemingly at random, most likely to shut down any opportunity on my part to react at all.

The dagger I kept at my waist was just something I'd lifted off an old foe not worth thinking about. It was a mass-crafted piece, but it had served me well. Still, I could hear it groaning as it took each of her heavy blows. The blade was starting to warp, throwing off its center of balance.

Dammit! I had piled on a bunch of add-ons for my One-Handed Swordsmanship, but the truth was that it wasn't one of my strongest skills. I was starting to lose control of the situation under this hail of blows. Her assault was so persistent and focused that I wanted to scream and ask who had told her my weaknesses.

"Haaaah..."

"Crap!"

A half second of wondering what abilities would be safe to reveal here had allowed the mensch to make a big move. All of her hand strikes had led me to assume that she was strictly a fistfighter, but she was readying an almighty kick! One could kick with three times the power of a punch. I'd barely been able to block all of her blows so far; it would be disastrous to take on this kick head-on.

Moreover, with her focusing cry, her muscles suddenly bulged, her leather straps straining with the change. A buffing formula flowed through her body, causing her already mighty leg to swell to almost log-like proportions.

"YAAAAH!"

With a shout that would frighten off even birds of prey, she leaped into a full-body spinning kick. With her arms giving her extra momentum, her heel spun so quickly that even my Lightning Reflexes could only barely keep up.

The next thing I noticed was all the wind being forced out of my lungs.

She'd traced the circular arc of her kick at a speed that surpassed human cognition. I think she had been aiming for the left side of my stomach. I couldn't be sure, though, because the kick was so damn fast that I didn't actually register

the hit—that, or because it had been so brutal that I had blacked out for the moment that it made contact.

It was nothing short of a miracle that my left arm had moved into position in time to soak the impact.

It was pure instinct that had caused me to drop my dagger, bring my hand in front of the intended point of contact, and to create a protective wall just in time. This instinctual guesswork was the only thing that had saved me from watching my legs grow ever farther away as the top of my body was blasted off.

I ignored the pain as I did a tailspin in midair. The intensity of our battle had left my ears useless, so I used Farsight to get a scope of my situation. If I kept sailing along this trajectory, I would receive a nice follow-up attack courtesy of the wall.

There was no way I could stick the landing unscathed. I might as well have been hit by a freight truck.

It pained me, but I needed to crack open my arsenal and bring out some help. I opened my lips ready to call out—those same lips that had received an alfish blessing.

“Lottie!”

“Okaaay!”

The moon was in the right phase; the wind wasn’t stagnant; optimal conditions to call on a certain sylphid.

Lottie’s wind allowed me to regain some control of my flight, and a gentle pocket of air brought my mad spinning to a graceful stop. I altered my course and propelled myself toward a ventilation window and freedom.

“Hmph! They’re so cruel to our Beloved One! How dare they!” Lottie said as she fluttered around me. I was carried down the street about a block away. At this distance, I could safely call myself extricated. This was far enough to be a completely different scene.

“Thank you, Lottie,” I said.

“It was easy-peasy! And I hate, hate them! They hurt you and they make the

air all stinky gross!”

Lottie was cute as ever as she huffed and puffed, but the incredible work she'd done just now drove home that she was a powerful being. Alfar were nearer to gods than any base meat-thing, and today Lottie had arguably done more for me than any deity.

Even if I had survived the hit thanks to my Insulating Barrier, I couldn't have done anything about the blowback. It had been a *really* hairy situation.

“How long has it been since my last brush with death?” I said to myself.

It had been a while since I had truly felt that my life was in danger. The last time had been when we had run out of tea in the cursed cedar's ichor maze.

I let Lottie's wind gracefully set me down and breathed a sigh of relief as I confirmed all my limbs were still attached. I was in one piece, but my left arm was looking pretty gnarly. I had tried to meet her kick with my elbow, as it was the least squishy part, and I'd also used my dagger as spaced armor, but the immense power of her kick had crushed the joint.

The impact had rippled through me. My shoulder was dislocated, and I was pretty sure every bone in my arm was broken. The wet sensation coursing over my fingers told me that it was most likely an open fracture.

I wasn't surprised, considering the might of that kick. I was thankful that I had limited the damage to one nonessential limb, to be honest. If she had hit my chest, the impact would have obliterated my heart and my lungs.

“Ugh... When the adrenaline wears off, this is going to hurt like a bitch...”

Our trusted healer had furnished each of our crew with a bottle, to be used in the event any of us found ourselves in over our heads with a particularly tenacious enemy.

I yanked off the stopper with my teeth and scraped the exposed end upon a nearby wall. It sparked, then caught alight, releasing a plume of colored smoke. Kaya had worked some pigments together to dye the plume a dazzling red. We had decided as a clan that if any of us saw the signal, whoever had lit it either needed immediate support or had failed in their mission.

This had been passed along to our fellow adventurers; the others, who would be finishing up with their jobs soon enough, would most likely come to my aid.

Now then, how to use the time between now and then? I'd rigged up Schutzwolfe with a locator enchantment well ahead of time, and so I retrieved her from beneath the rubble and broken boxes back at the warehouse with a little space-time magic mischief. The area was thick with Lottie's mana, so no one would notice my business here.

"How disappointing! Do you realize how cruel it is to turn down a woman's invitation?"

Of course she hasn't given up!

It sounded like she was behind me...but I twigged in a matter of moments to the trick—a simple Voice Transfer spell. She emerged from the shadows of a building in front of me.

I hadn't written off this possibility, but what tenacity! And how could she teleport into such a tiny shadow?! *Come on gods, nerf this woman, I beg You!*

"Whose man do you think you're looking at?"

Right when I had her at a more manageable midrange and was wondering how far I could get with one arm out of commission, I sensed two, no, three things hurtling overhead.

Margit had caught up with me, to my surprise. She threw herself from a nearby roof as she loosed a bolt from each of her eastern-style crossbows. Hoping to get the kill in, Margit had launched herself right at my assailant's head.

"To think that someone could hide their presence from me!" the woman said.

"As if I would let anyone trying to poach from me see me coming!" Margit replied.

Three simultaneous deadly projectiles had evidently been a little too much for the mensch woman. She managed to twist her body to avoid the bolts, but she was forced to take on Margit's daggered lunge with her hand.

The pair of them froze. Although her light weight took some of the *oomph* out

of plunging attacks like this, her dagger—forged and maintained such that it could slit the throat of a full-grown wild boar—pierced the assassin’s hand. Her movements were limited, and she had no shadows to flee into now. Just as I was about to dash in and make use of this opening, a voice that only I could hear tickled my earlobe and made me stop.

“Thanks, Lottie,” I said.

“Here it comes!” she replied.

As the two women grappled, I stepped back and swung Schutzwolfe overhead. An ear-piercing sound shook the air.

She was more than a block away and fully indoors, but the vierman had gotten a lucky fix on me through the warehouse’s window. The distance worked to their advantage—it had been nigh impossible to sense them readying their bow. But no matter how skilled the archer, no one could hope to keep a sylphid from noticing an aberration in the currents of the air. As long as I was aware of *when* the arrow had been loosed, it would be trivial to knock it out of the air, no matter its speed. Any less would bring shame to the Skill IX name.

The arrow had broken the sound barrier, but I heard it clatter to the ground behind me as I cut it down. I could almost hear the wasted energy dispersing from its cooling frame.

Oof, but my hand is stinging... That arrow had some kick behind it. Get hit at the wrong angle and not even mystarille could stop that.

“What a pain...” Margit said. “What is your body even made of?”

With a shrill metallic rasping sound that a dagger should *not* have made against human flesh, Margit leaped away from the assassin and did a half rotation around my neck. As she settled into her usual spot with a lot more intensity than usual, she clucked her tongue in displeasure. Not only was she disappointed in her sneak attack, her beloved dagger from Konigstuhl had suffered quite the wear and tear. A pro sharpener’s TLC would be needed to bring it back to life.

I immediately hoofed it to avoid any more deadly arrow fire or unwanted company. This time, the night assassin in the evening gown didn’t pursue.

However, I did hear her shouting.

“Tch! Lost your nerve, Goldilocks?! Your father would weep at your cowardice!”

“I survived *your* five-on-one! Come back when you can actually finish the job!”

Ignore her shouting, Erich! Such taunts weren’t genuine—it was a bid to slow the quarry’s pace. Even if she mocked all of my late ancestors, I needed to plug up my ears and keep moving my feet! Revenge would be mine, but if I let her control the situation now I would only be playing into her hand. I wouldn’t fight to a satisfactory level.

It would be Margit, me, and as much as I didn’t like it, probably a few Fellows, versus the rest of them. I was worn out, whereas all five of them were still kicking. If I responded to her heckling, we would be at a severe disadvantage. It irked me, but I needed to live to see another day!

“You saved me, Margit,” I said.

“I apologize for taking so long to find you,” she said. “Every opening had a trap waiting for me.”

“And our Fellows?”

“I ordered them to retreat to the rendezvous point. They understood after I told them that if the enemy made *you* order them to not get involved, then they wouldn’t even be able to buy time.”

It must have been hard for them to swallow, but it was the most expedient option. Putting aside that I was severely outnumbered, I hadn’t managed to take a single one of them down. They were deadly foes, pure and simple. I was really thankful for my partner’s cool head under pressure.

However, I wondered if our fight had gotten a little out of hand. I noticed that the ruckus had awoken some of the locals, and now adventurers were convening on my smoke signal. I prayed that our enemies would take this as their sign to retreat. Time was now on our side, and they had wanted to eliminate me alone—I doubted they would want to act with so many sets of eyes around.

Ugh, they really did a number on me... When Lady Maxine explicitly told me not to die, I'd thought it seemed like a flag, but to be attacked immediately upon walking through the door was way too quick a turnaround for my tastes. *Dammit, Gray Head! You've got a gaping hole somewhere that almost made me buy the farm!*

I didn't want to hear anyone even try to say that it was dreadful luck that had so thoroughly ruined my day. Sure, I knew how foul a hand fate liked to deal me, loath as I was to admit it, but getting thrown into that pit of murderous vipers went beyond *luck*. I'd been *set up*.

"Are you okay, Erich?" Margit said. "Your left arm is in quite the state."

"If I'm being honest, I've been trying to not look at it," I replied. "Is it bad?"

"Oh... Well... Keeping things figurative, I would say it looks like a thoroughly abused toothpick."

Thank you for the lovely mental image.

I'd screwed the pooch. Hiding your hand and knowing when to drip feed the right amount were different things. I could see Lady Agrippina laughing at me now. All the same, it wouldn't have been good for me to pull out all the stops just because I was on the back foot. Looking at things in the long term, the enemy would have *loved* to see me show my whole hand. I couldn't justify going in wands blazing.

Even if I eliminated one of them, as soon as I revealed my arsenal, I could tell that they would have come with me with all they had too. As soon as I had gotten serious, I bet they would have sent one out as a sacrificial pawn to set me up for the perfect counterattack from the rest of them. I wanted to avoid that if at all possible.

During my fight with that woman, I had the voice of a certain mystic blade in my ear *screaming* at me, wondering why I hadn't drawn it and turned it upon such a worthy opponent.

The Craving Blade was a weapon that I only wanted to use when I *knew* I could kill every last witness. I had a wider circle of connections now. I had more than just Siegfried's fragile mind to protect; the whole Fellowship was better off

not freaking out over the black blade I kept at my side. I didn't want it stirring up rumors.

Who knew what would happen? I felt that I would literally implode if someone labeled me as a fake swordsman because of my mystic blade. It wouldn't be fun if I got a bunch of sword-hungry bandits coming to steal it either. Not to speak of the collectors of curios and intrigued magia who would beg me to sell it off to them. The most avid among them would most likely be the best equipped to part my head from my shoulders if I wouldn't give the nod and take their money.

My safest option to maintain a healthy adventuring life was to only bust it out in the most desperate of situations.

And so, after this base-raiding mission, only I—the one who had helped steer the whole thing—had failed. But a surprise was waiting for us. When we returned to the warehouse, we found that our original targets had already been dispatched—most likely to prevent them from spilling their guts to us. I'd come face-to-face with some of Diablo's deadliest assassins, but it'd take some powerful mind management to get me to say I'd come away from the experience with great results.

What a morning... I would have been sick in the head to even imagine that a goth-loli ninja would bust out of the blue baying for blood.

[Tips] The quickest method to draw on the boons or power of another force is to integrate it within yourself. Mages of the distant past would accessorize with the sources of their puissance, or experiment with altering their very bodies.

Magia of the Imperial College say that such methods are incomplete due to the extreme measures required and the difficulty in teaching such things. However heterodox it becomes, magical augmentation of the self is hardly an inferior method.

At around the same time as Erich's deadly onslaught, Siegfried and his team were putting a neat bow on a job well done, completely unaware of their clan

leader's troubles.

"I guess that just about wraps things up," Siegfried said.

In preparation for the conditions of the day's job, the Fellows had all donned miasma-warding face coverings. Siegfried scanned the room, confirming that despite their suspicious appearances the only people still standing were allies, before cleaning his blade.

"Gerrit, how's things over there?"

"All cleaned up!" came the reply. "It was an easy job, Big Bro Dee!"

"Gah, call me Siegfried!"

The teasing that had begun last night still hadn't run its course. Siegfried shook his fist at Gerrit—who *also* went by a different name, but this detail was apparently lost on everyone—but the former spy ducked back out of the door and out of sight.

This banter was typical of boys their age, but the scene was anything but. Blood splattered every available surface, and all around lay heads, heads, heads—all parted from the shoulders of Diablo's minions, each face frozen in an expression of shock, agony, and confusion.

The operation had been swift. Potions designed to suppress their foes had been pitched through every window within range. The crooks had still been fast asleep, snoring through their last breaths. It had been a breeze for the Fellowship to mop up.

If Erich had been here, he would probably have thought that the GM had decided it was too much effort to bother rolling for initiative.

"But man," Siegfried went on, "who'da thought they'd even look the part. Did Diablo's recruiters just turn you away if your mug didn't meet some kind of baseline level of gnarliness?"

Even when the fallen were scoundrels to the last, it was a Fellowship policy to treat their heads with care. The tear gas potions had left them in quite the pathetic state, but some still had enough guts to grab the daggers at their pillows and attempt a counterattack. Siegfried picked up one such head and

carefully wrapped it up.

“Hey, Big Bro Dee? Basement was empty,” Etan said. “I think we got them all.”

“You too, Etan?! Call me Siegfried, or so help me gods, I’ll...”

The hero-hopeful had personally taken five heads. The building had three floors—technically two, as the first floor’s ceiling had been removed to open up more storage space. Whether the owner had signed off on such alterations was an open question. Siegfried had dispatched the three sleeping up on the top floor and two idiots that had fallen asleep by the door instead of keeping watch. Etan, Gerrit, and the other Fellows had all taken one kill each. Counting up the heads, the number had matched their intel.

It was a peaceful end to the mission. No ugly surprises in the form of unaccounted-for heads had turned up, and with no one they were obliged to capture alive, there was little left to do at this juncture.

“Curse the lot of them... Don’t they know how important the name is to me? Whatever, I’ll give ’em a good lecture later,” Siegfried muttered. He raised his voice: “Hey, you lot, open those windows! We gotta get some fresh air in here. Keep your face masks on, got it?”

The base had been successfully won, but they still had some investigating to do. Boots tracking through the blood, Siegfried picked through the battle-ravaged building.

On the first floor—on second glance, Siegfried thought that the renovations had most definitely taken place without permission—were boxes of Kykeon, as well as an assembled aerosolizer. In other words, nothing out of the ordinary. However, he was aware how close they had been to imminent crisis. The magic tool looked ready to fire anytime; he imagined that Diablo had intended to use it in a matter of days.

“Hm? This their breakfast or something?” Siegfried said. Lit by the morning glow through the open window, he was checking a desk to see if anyone had mistakenly left important documents or notes when he saw something odd. “Well, they ain’t being fed very well. Not much of their blood money’s going into decent grub, it seems.”

It wasn't clear if it was their breakfast or leftovers from last night, but pieces of cheap-looking black bread were lined up on the desk. It was of appalling quality. The sad-looking lumps were more rye than decent wheat and tough enough to break your teeth. The person who'd baked them must have thrown them all into a communal oven without much thought. They should have just given their flour to an actual baker; they might have ended up with something edible. Unfortunately poverty didn't afford them such luxuries. Most who merely scraped by used the communal oven every few days to cook something to eat.

"Hold on... This ain't merely badly baked, it looks like diseased wheat..."

With the dawn sun illuminating the bread, Siegfried furrowed his brow at what he noticed.

"Um, Bro? What's 'diseased wheat'?"

"Huh? Never heard of it, Gerrit?"

"Sorry, I grew up in a town, not the countryside... Well, it was pretty rural compared to Marsheim, to be honest."

Gerrit awkwardly scratched his head as he replied.

"Diseased wheat is pretty much exactly that," Siegfried said as he pointed at the dry bread. "The ears of wheat turn black and decay. Every farmer knows you shouldn't eat wheat like that."

"Wait... Plants get sick too?" Gerrit said.

"Well, yeah? Everythin' livin' can get sick. Whenever we got some diseased wheat, the whole canton would get into a fuss wonderin' who the Harvest Goddess was punishing."

Bread made with diseased wheat would end up looking more black than usual, and this effect was compounded when rye was mixed in. In the case of the pieces on the table, the flour must have been poorly milled because it looked visibly lumpy. The farmer-turned-rookie-instructor ripped off a chunk of bread to reveal, as expected, black bits of chaff.

"Oh! We had 'em once too, Bro," Etan chipped in. "Family who caused it was

forced to the other side of the moat. Wasn't pretty."

"The other side of the moat...? Oh, you mean they were kicked out of town?"

"Well, not permanently. They weren't allowed to come to the village assembly and stuff."

Another former farm lad, Etan clearly had experience with what Siegfried dubbed "diseased wheat," even if the nomenclature differed from region to region. They lived in an age where information didn't spread so quickly, and this went double for inauspicious concepts. Fortunately, the description had been enough to put Etan on the same page.

It was believed that a family produced diseased wheat because their faith in the Harvest Goddess was lacking. In most cantons, the punishment for this was social ostracism.

This wasn't done completely without reason. The blight could easily spread to wheat crops planted elsewhere. As soon as it was spotted, a whole canton would get up in arms at having spotted a veritable hornets' nest in their midst. The local priest of the Harvest Goddess would be enraged, as would the rest of the community—any diseased wheat could not be used as part of the annual land tax.

Negative effects weren't all directly felt either. Rumors would spread in nearby cantons that diseased wheat was rife in *that* canton. Merchants wouldn't want to take on poor stock, so they would start to avoid cantons that came up too often in the rumor mill.

"But man, eatin' this stuff because there's nothing else to chow on?" Siegfried said. "They must've been damn desperate."

Bread made with diseased wheat wouldn't kill you after a few mouthfuls, so it was no surprise for people with no other option to resort to it. Unfortunately, even the high heats from cooking weren't enough to purge the bread of toxins; the more you put away, the more you risked your limbs wasting to sticks and your brain rotting down to curds. Still, hunger and common sense rarely got on long. Some pregnant women, given desperate enough conditions, would keep eating the stuff knowing full well it would make them miscarry.

“Were they really that desperate? Really?” Etan said.

The audhumbla had taken a step back from the desk, evidently paranoid that the bread was ill-omened. It was no surprise, really. This stuff wouldn't stop at ruining a single plot of land—in the worst-case scenario, the church would be called in to set a whole field ablaze to rid the land of it.

The farmers-turned-adventurers realized that although it wouldn't be much of a surprise for a poor city dweller to buy tainted bread without knowing, it was a bit odd for members of a growing drug empire to willingly consume it.

“They're not just fringe dealers either,” Etan said. “They're close to the center of the organization, so I doubt they would be hurtin' for money.”

“They save money by only givin' the fringe dealers the bare minimum white bread they need,” replied Siegfried.

Knowledge had spread about the dangers of diseased wheat, and now the outbreaks only really occurred in the most rural of farming villages, or where the local gods and the Rhinian pantheon engaged in a divine tug of war that the regular person couldn't see. Most of these communities were run by bullheaded leaders whose talents weren't all that respected by their constituencies.

Siegfried's and Etan's hometowns were cut from savvier cloth. The farmers understood that diseased wheat was to be burned immediately and the gap in the crop was to be filled by mixing together various grains. Even if winter was going to be tough, they would under no circumstances dare to eat it. It went without saying that Marsheim had at least as little interest in seeing blighted goods brought within its walls.

“Hey, Bro? I found some bags of wheat in the basement along with the boxes of Kykeon!”

While Siegfried and Etan were pondering the lumpy pieces of bread, Gerrit had investigated the basement and had just returned to report his findings. After his second-in-command had mentioned the communal oven, he thought that perhaps some flour was still remaining unused. After a quick search, he had found bags stuffed with blackened wheat.

“No way... It’s all diseased wheat,” Siegfried muttered, a frown visible.

“Seriously?! Gross!” Etan said. He joined the middle finger and thumb of his right hand to form a circle before rotating it in the air before him—a cleansing act practiced by the cult of the Harvest Goddess.

“There’s so much of it,” Gerrit said. “Were they making it here...?”

“Nah, I don’t think so,” Siegfried said as Gerrit trailed off. “No pestles. You wouldn’t be able to cook up a single potion here, let alone something like Kykeon.”

Siegfried had helped maintain and organize Kaya’s workshop countless times by now. He had a general idea of what it took to concoct potions. Kaya kept her workshop spotless; this room was positively filthy. Kaya had told Siegfried that her cleanliness didn’t just come from a desire to have a tidy place to work with. On a practical level, if any stray dust contaminated the reagents, the quality of her concoctions would suffer.

Along with the dirt and grime, these thugs had no ventilation worth mentioning, nor a single cauldron to their name. All that they had were empty bottles of booze littering the floor. It was almost certain that nothing was actually synthesized here.

“Hey... Hold on,” Siegfried said as he picked up one of the stray bottles at his feet. “This liquor’s fancy stuff.”

He pondered for a moment: *What would idiots who had spent all their money on expensive alcohol—and possibly some late-night company—do to make sure they had something to eat?*

As the image of Siegfried’s deadbeat dad flittered in his mind’s eye, he came up with a theory.

They must have stolen this wheat from somewhere—most likely from *their own allies in Diablo* in order to fill the holes in their bellies. And why would their allies have so much of this diseased wheat? Siegfried wondered if he had, perhaps, got hold of a loose thread that could be followed all the way back to the origin of Kykeon...

“Hey, someone fetch Kaya,” he said. “Right now.”

“Got it.”

Good and bad news wound themselves together in the hero-hopeful’s mind while he waited for his Fellows to fetch their herbalist. Now that the base had been subdued, they didn’t need to worry about Kaya getting caught in the cross fire.

Siegfried was sure that this horrid discovery would help them finally draw the Kykeon affair to a close.

[Tips] Despite the narrow implications of the name, wheat blight threatens many of the Empire’s staple cereal crops. It is detested as a stain upon the Harvest Goddess’s golden garb.

It won’t kill you if you eat it, but consuming it will cause intense pain. It is feared by farmers all across the land. However, the threat of famine can push anyone to far worse depths. Those in the know recognize they are only deferring their agony by surrendering to their stomachs, while those who don’t end up feasting upon the stuff in moments of unwitting desperation.

The female assassin visualized the day’s events as a series of maneuvers on an ehrengarde board, trying to unravel precisely where everything had come so entirely off the rails.

She had made the right choice at each stage. She was sure of that. She and all her compatriots had all lived to see another day.

The assassin hadn’t had any other choice in the Kykeon affair but to lend her aid, and everything she had done had been in consideration of its success. She and her team had done everything in their power.

This much was no different from how they had conducted business for the past twenty years.

And yet, despite their track record, it felt as if the situation just would not improve. Their present situation was a perfect microcosm of the larger issue.

Troublesome little pieces remained in annoying locations; worrying larger pieces came to strike at their heart again and again. Her opponent’s upper hand

was still far from *certain*; their prince still sat unpromoted to an emperor, but the state of the board spoke volumes: things were awfully out of their favor.

Yet she had to acknowledge that she was only a piece on the board, not a player.

Even if the assassin had been told that it was her own bad move that had created this situation, she wasn't the one at the top making the decisions. She didn't even know who to air out her complaints to. If she grumbled to the God of Cycles, arbiter of fate, He would probably ignore her, most likely because such matters were beneath Him.

The gods weren't cruel, but They weren't necessarily kind either. They merely passed judgment on your fate after death based upon Their own personal calculations in line with Their teachings. No mere mortal trapped in linear time could reckon with the cosmic truth in earnest.

"Bea... A'e you o'ay?" the hlessi asked her leader.

"I'm quite fine, Lepsia. I'm made of sterner stuff."

Back in the warehouse, after the assassins' leader had decided to fall back, Lepsia expressed her concern despite her own wounds. Lepsia was the only one left that called her "Bea." Maybe it was this amity that still let her put on a confident face and laugh at adversity.

The leader of the elite assassins took off her glove and examined the wound on her hand. Poison from Margit's attack had seeped inside, yes, but this was easily metabolized. She poured some more mana into the permanent formula that buffed her physical prowess. As she flexed her muscles to allow the mana to flow through her, the bleeding eventually stopped.

This woman usually kept her hands hidden, but the removal of her glove revealed a trailing, complex magic circle in the pattern of a lily of the valley—a plant as deadly as it was medically valuable. These properties helped stimulate her own body's healing factor. Although Margit's blade had cut through her hand up to the middle joint of her ring finger, it wouldn't take more than half a day for the bone to mend. It had helped that it had been a clean cut.

"See that?" she said to Lepsia.

“P’ease don’ push you’s’e’f,” the hlessi responded in a quiet voice.

The leader flashed another grin at Lepsia and said that she should worry about her own injuries. After all, hlessi weren’t exactly sturdy.

She was their *leader*, and her confidence flowed out from that fact. She was their rock; the only support these four vagabonds had. She couldn’t ever dare to voice any meaningful worry or concern.

“But this wasn’t the most ideal of outcomes. We should have finished him off,” the group’s leader said. She took off her other glove and touched her cheek before muttering an incantation.

“Little Hans did go, to a world he did not know... He walked for seven years, and slept for seven too... Even passing seven people, he was ignored as he passed through...”

The words were lifted from a pastoral nursery rhyme, but this aided in its power. The more people knew the words from the incantation, the easier it would be for the world to accept the changes in reality. If a magus were here, they would shake their head at such an utterly vulgar method.

After she finished reciting the words, the tattoos snaking across her body disappeared; the attention-grabbing makeup fell from her face. Her skin was transformed, perfectly concealing her arcane tattoos. It was as if a different woman stood in the same clothes. Although the bags under her eyes had always been visible, the lack of any adornments upon her face made them stand out, giving her a fleeting kind of beauty. Whereas before she looked as if she were ready to kill, now it looked like she might pass away at any moment.

“But this isn’t good,” she muttered. “If we don’t kill Goldilocks Erich, this mud boat will sink ahead of schedule...”

She flicked the straps off her boots and slipped out of them. The whole outfit was so complicated that it almost required outside help to put on, but she undid it all without complaint as she walked. With each step, each piece landed on the floor behind her. Eventually, her slender body was only covered by a black leotard spun from the whiskers of a stamping drake.

“What do, Sheikh?” said the vierman, Shahrnaz. “I not know much, but...it

best to kill him, no?”

“You’re quite right, Shahrnaz,” the leader replied. “Our client failed to restrain those fools. Then they had to get *picky* about which piece to infect with their poison. That was why we needed to settle the score today, but...”

Shahrnaz picked up the trailing clothes and pushed them into a knapsack. In return, she handed her leader an old, simple flax cloak. It was decorated with a yellow sash—only worn by those who sold *personal* services. In less euphemistic terms, it was the uniform of a sex worker. With this, the disguise was complete. With the hood up, not even those who knew her would recognize her now. Many women would refuse to wear such a thing, even if it meant fleeing for their lives, but it was the perfect way for an adventurer to lose herself in the crowd.

“I expected so much from those local lords,” she went on, “but I didn’t think that those cloaked fools would run about so wildly as this...”

“But Sheikh, *they* born here, no? This state...unexpected,” the vierman said.

“Yes, it’s as you say. But you all are blessed with *logic*. Whereas these people have an obsession with *place*. Their reasoning runs at strange angles to our own. Some folk would light a furnace to burn a hair.”

“Main is quite surprised too,” the huntsman arachne added. “Leader, surely vah was only meant to be the opening gambit of ve’s negotiations?”

Main was making her own preparations to depart from the warehouse. To this question, the leader could only pull a wry grin that said, *Yes, that was how it should have gone.*

In truth, the whole Kykeon production and distribution engine was the business of a separate partner to their client. Originally, they had only intended to produce Elefsina’s Eye; Kykeon wasn’t even a glimmer of an idea at that point. The plan had been to use this new drug to rein in the Baldur Clan—who leaned in Margrave Marsheim’s favor—and to make money by selling it to various satellite states. That had been their whole opening gambit.

However, the plan had gotten out of hand. The bigger it grew, the more people voiced their own ideas, and with the addition of an excessively talented

individual, the strings that held the plot together stretched so wide and thin that the one who had incited the whole affair couldn't see the entire picture anymore.

They had created a drug that brought an immediate, inescapable ecstasy, and it had been spread around Ende Erde with no inhibition. A sane person would never concoct something like this, nor share the methods of its dissemination. And even if they had managed to, only those with the basest of villainous hearts would dare to put it into action.

"They should never have resorted to pushing Kykeon so early on," the leader said. "No, it should never have been made at all. All they have done is set in motion a wheel of revenge that will spin on into eternity."

By merely bringing it into existence, it had caused those who opposed it to decide that a swift death was the only solution—the only option was to kill or be killed. If you looked upon this affair with a wider lens, it seemed almost farcical. It was like watching a foolish dog or cat snapping at their own tail at the corner of their vision. Yet a human could only reckon with so much at once. The more they tried to expand their reach, the more people got involved, and the more complicated the affair became.

There would always be those who rallied under the same leader or stood on the same side—with the local lords, for example—but had different destinations in mind. Even if they dreamed of the same victory, some could never keep their intentions even for the next few years to come from running at cross-purposes. Some dreamed of a victory that would come slower, in a century or so.

"What led us here, I wonder..." the leader murmured to herself.

"Huh?" Primanne said. "Didn't we wank *tik ko gek* revenge *tik* for Alberk?"

The leader nodded. "Indeed... Albert... Yes, this debt traces back to *him* in the end, doesn't it?"

Albert had been the group's youngest and most recent recruit. He'd been killed in action the year before. With him gone, Main was once more the sole newcomer to the group. The One Cup Clan had lost much with his death. His absence still felt like an open wound. They would get their revenge. That was

how it had always been—there would be no clan without solidarity in retribution.

“If we go back far enough, it was my own survival that put us here...” the leader muttered.

If a follower lost an arm, she would make the enemy atone by taking four. If one of her allies were *killed*, then slaughter was the only reasonable response. She’d sworn as much long ago, when there was still more than one person left in the world to call her “Bea.” She’d made that oath to a band that no one but her remembered now.

She had once been of a renowned household, but all throughout her childhood, she had never once been praised for her talents—or at least, so it seemed through her own lens toward the world. Driven by a need to live strictly on her terms, she ran away from home, taught herself magic, then made steps toward becoming an adventurer of renown. She was hardly the first to do it.

“Albert, Gaetan, *Chantal*,” she went on. “All of them lost, all on the same job—that never happened before. One year, and three of us dead... Something is *slipping*.”

“Y-Yeah... We paid ’em back for *tik* Gaekan and Chankal, but *tik* we never gok Alberk back...”

She’d fled her home for simple enough reasons. She wanted better for herself than the entrapped life she had known was commonplace for women of her status all over. She would sooner die than marry a man two summers her senior and have the meaning of their life end there. She wanted to become an adventurer and prove her worth to the world itself.

The dream didn’t last; it was brought crashing down by the most minuscule of complications. With it came the end of everything she had created: budding camaraderie, strengthening trust, and a love that had disguised itself as a growing sense of self.

She’d lost everything to a simple reconnaissance mission.

“Looking back on it, we lost Patrice to that job too, in the long run. You remember him, don’t you, Lepsia? You were rather fond of him.”

“I re’em’er,” the hlessi replied. “He was a ’ood ’erson.”

The trauma of each and every job she had taken on with the One Cup Clan had been burned into her memory, but it was this first job, the one that had ended and begun everything, that outclassed them all.

It had been a simple monster hunt. Young adventurers as they were, they had laughed it up at the time; how foolish the magistrate was to hire *four* parties to chase down a few violent animals!

But the job had turned out nothing like they had been told to expect. They had reached the cave expecting a family of bears, but instead they found a pregnant lesser drake. The magistrate had been no paranoid fool anxious over a few hungry beasts; he had sent out these adventurers as a litmus test *with no expectation that they would return alive*.

Adventurers were cheap and disposable pawns. There was no shortage of replacements waiting to leap into action. Not only that, they didn’t even *need* to report back. No news merely told the magistrate that they had perished, and this was all he really wanted to know. The whole point of the expedition was to furnish him with convincing evidence that the issue was serious enough to warrant aid from higher-class adventurers or knights. The magistrate had probably decided that their deaths were the clearest means to prove the drake’s imminent threat and would lead to the smoothest negotiations with the nobles in charge.

In short, he’d *wanted* all twenty of these rookies to perish, all to make his report that more convincing. If he’d managed that, it would have put him in a better position to get his way, furnishing him with all the evidence he needed to make the nobles further up the chain of command look like indolent fools.

“Then two years ago, we lost Carole and Cecile in Szczecin,” the leader continued, reflecting on the past years of the group.

“I not yet joined then,” Shahrnaz said. “Heard they strong.”

“That they were. They were two floresiensis sisters. They moved so in time with one another—truly singular talents. People couldn’t tell them apart when they fell into their rhythm.”

They hadn't all died in that lesser drake's den, of course. Of the twenty adventurers, a mere four survived. They had lost their allies and their armor, and barely crawled their way from out of the cave. They were certain that even if they limped back home, the magistrate would have taken measures to ensure that no one knew the truth behind the tragedy that had befallen them.

As the survivors shared one measly cup of gruel, they made a promise. Revenge would be theirs. Those who had thrown them to the wolves would suffer, all to be certain that they would join their fellows in the next world.

"Patrick, Eckart, Josette, Charles..."

As she named their fallen and counted them with her fingers, all that remained of them was a stinging loneliness and the memories of the moment she had avenged each of them. The One Cup Clan had far outgrown the original twenty unfortunate adventurers. At their peak, they had numbered sixty. And yet, only the five here remained.

Had they chosen the wrong path in life?

The clan was a home for these pitiful souls that had been abandoned by everyone they had known, who had been deemed useless and cast aside to the crevasse overlooking death. The One Cup Clan only asked one thing of its members in return.

It was only natural to want to shed blood for fallen comrades. It was easy to tell someone to forget the past, but how could anyone when it still so clearly defined their present? Was it truly human to sit in silence as you lost those precious to you?

They could not, would not endure the mockery of the more-content-than-thou. Vengeance was something that only those who had lost, who had been stolen from, could understand. Digging two graves on a mission of vengeance was *amateur hour*.

Even though only one member from the original twenty was still alive to remember the oath they'd shared, she would not allow anyone to deny their truth.

How could these poor adventurers sit in silence after their fellows had been

killed, treated as nothing more than a disposable rag or toothpick, heartlessly tallied up as collateral damage?

She had decided that those who'd wronged her own would be brought to a just end, but here she found herself wondering if such a path should have led her here.

She was certain that they hadn't made a mistake. Every one of the clan had hoped as much. They had laughed—*If I die, then at least kill the one who killed me.*

Even if this path they walked down led to more of their number being lost in the future, they would continue as they always had. No matter what sort of terrible job they had to undertake to achieve their goals, they would make sure that in the end the scales were balanced.

"A question, Main," the leader said. "Was there any fault in my leadership?"

"Tum did all that was possible, leader," Main replied. "Tum were the first to catch on that the plan was in shambles. Tum warned ve of the dangers abound. Main also believes that although vah was quite the independent move, choosing to eliminate Goldilocks Erich was the most appropriate decision. 'Vwas the optimal choice, leader."

The decision had been made as a group after pooling all their intel. If Main said so, then their leader had nothing more to add.

They had all entered into this willingly. None of them believed that they would receive a positive judgment from the gods at the ends of their tales, but they did believe that the gods viewed the whole scope of their lives. They merely wished to bring about their own justice, so that they could settle their own scores in the world of the living.

That was why they couldn't tell themselves that they weren't *wrong* this time, why they hadn't failed. She tried to tell herself this, but doubt still bubbled underneath.

"You're quite right," the leader said. "This was the best option for us. It was preferable to sitting around and doing nothing."

The names of the lost kept coming to her. As they did, terrible theories

surfaced and clouded her mind: *Was it a mistake to seek revenge for Albert? Was it a mistake to take responsibility for the fates of these four who stand with me now? Was it a mistake to have hunted down the magistrate for my fallen fellows back then? If death had come for me instead...would so much tragedy have been avoided?*

She didn't want to entertain the possibility that any of these could be true. If her entire life since that fateful day had been a *mistake*, then by the gods, was there anyone out there who could give her a decent answer as to what she should have done with all that anger and despair?

"B-Bea... Ca'm dow'... You're 'lee'ing..."

"Hm? Oh, right... Sorry, Lepsia. I must have tensed up without noticing."

She smiled at Lepsia, nonchalantly adding that it wouldn't be good to dirty her disguise. She cast a quick Clean spell so that the room no longer bore any traces of their presence. One more useful bit of tradecraft, learned purely out of necessity.

As the assassin stepped out of the disposable hideout—one of many—she realized something.

"That's right... I told myself that I would ask Goldilocks a question if he managed to survive my first attack..."

Goldilocks had gotten involved in this crisis more by chance than anything else. She wanted to ask him how it felt becoming so entangled in this grand web of killing.

As he had fled, she had wanted to tease him more—to say that choosing to stand your ground was more effort than it looked like—but she had gotten a bit carried away, it seemed.

The assassin smiled, thinking that she would get her answer the next time they met before disappearing into the shadows of a nearby alleyway.

[Tips] Humans are creatures driven more by sentiment than reason. At the same time, they are pitiful creatures that cannot live without their capacity for thought without passion.

It was an odd feeling to have secured such a splendid overall result but not have actually changed the situation for the better.

I wasn't being cynical or anything. Our operation involved a huge roster of adventurers, and yet of all the people assembled in this one room today, I was the only one who had sustained a major injury, *and* we hadn't even managed to raid our base. I wanted to reiterate—this *wasn't* coming out of my bitterness that our victory on paper didn't feel as good as it should!

“Is that everything in your reports?” said Lady Maxine.

On the evening of our citywide raid, the heads of the participating clans gathered in the reception room of the Adventurer's Association. We were here instead of that plush room in the Golden Mane because the details of our meeting no longer required conditions of absolute secrecy. In fact, Lady Maxine wanted to make something of an open conspiracy about the matter now that we'd made our move. Although she wasn't trying to rake the nobles of Ende Erde over the coals, she wouldn't mind if a few rumors reached designated ears, that perhaps the nobles should pull up their bootstraps a bit or perhaps they should feel a little bit embarrassed for letting some lowly *adventurers* decide the future of the city.

It bore repeating that Marsheim was chock-full of cliques and factions. From info leakers to sleeper agents, the Association had all manner of holes. Even if we said not a single word about our operation outside of these walls, inevitably the details would find their way to relevant ears. This would be further expedited by the innate human urge for gossip. Sooner or later, the news would reach everyone it needed to.

Our manager was particularly talented in this area. Timings were calculated to a tee, pressure was applied, complaints weren't permitted; the message was always delivered loud and clear.

“Well, not a bad result,” she went on after everyone nodded their assent. “Consider your alcohol expenses for tonight paid by the Association. You did a good job. I might even consider gifting honorary promotions to those adventurers who perished in action.”

Our report for Lady Maxine had skewed generally positive. Several clans had lost a few members in battle—mostly subcontractors in the Heilbronn Familie or the Baldur Clan—but we’d just about met our goals.

Each and every base had been crushed; important pieces had been killed or captured. The ones left alive were probably in very good care right now, having a nice little conversation about their career choices. This little job was being dealt with directly by Lady Maxine—no outsourcing to the Baldur Clan this time—and I expected that her hired mages had given our crooks a really *warm* welcome.

“While it is well within your remit as adventurers to make merry with a well-earned drink or twelve after a successful job, I fear we can’t unstopper the kegs and raise our glasses *quite* yet. Goldilocks?” Lady Maxine looked over at me.

“Yes, ma’am,” I said.

I stood up, but with my left arm in a sling, I probably painted a pathetic picture as I struggled to my feet. Kaya had done a bit of emergency work on it, but she was no surgeon. She’d apologized in the moment that she wasn’t the best at setting bones. Not only that, she had said that the force of the blow might have resulted in some nerve damage. For the sake of not causing any further harm, she’d refused to employ any anesthetics while my arm was still on the mend. In short: even now, it hurt like a *motherfucker*.

“Hmm... Would you prefer to smoke?” Lady Maxine inquired, looking at my arm. “I can make an exception for today.”

“I appreciate the kind offer, Madam Manager,” I said, “but not while I’m convalescing. Doctor’s orders.”

“Right. You may remain seated, if that is preferable.”

Lady Maxine had evidently seen the pain creasing my forehead and had made this kind exception on my behalf. As much work as it had taken to put me in a state that required no further fussing over, I still wished that some benevolent force would drop by and leave me with some anachronistically strong painkillers.

I hadn’t drawn Kaya’s righteous ire this time—she was a professional, never

bringing personal feelings into the matter when it came to healing work—but she told me that apparently if you dulled the pain when you were speeding up a fractured bone’s recovery, it would worsen the prognosis. Pain was your body’s way of putting up a red flag. When people willingly ignored these pain signals, they often ended up overextending themselves. This went double for constant, aching, unsuppressable pain. I doubt even the most twisted of masochists could have put up with the lingering agonies of having the snot beaten out of you in a five-on-one matchup.

My situation had been so bad that it would’ve been pointless to even ask Kaya how many places my arm was broken in—I had a nice cocktail of open and comminuted fractures—and she had managed to get my mess of an arm ready to be fixed up in a matter of days. I was well aware that I was in no position to complain.

“One shouldn’t ignore the requests of their doctor,” Lady Maxine went on. “I ignore my father and that brother of mine if the situation calls for it, but *never* my physician. You won’t understand until you’re older, I imagine.”

“A doctor, huh,” chimed Miss Laurentius. “Can’t say I’ve had the misfortune of knowing one!”

She was plainly in good spirits. Apparently she’d found her first worthy opponent in a *bit* on the day of the raid; her battle-junkie blood was still up from the fray.

Despite their skills, the crook that she had bested hadn’t been on Lady Maxine’s hit list, and so there had been no extra payment in it for her. It hadn’t dulled her mood in the slightest—she had simply said she was happy to enjoy a good drink with the head later. I was happy for her, but sharing a drink with one’s grisly battle trophy was way out of the question for my mensch tastes.

“I ain’t so much as caught a cold,” Stefano said with a nod.

“Indeed... I hadn’t paid it much thought before, but I haven’t had any dealings with healers in that capacity either,” Mister Fidelio added.

I didn’t want to come off as rude, but I wasn’t surprised by Stefano’s comment at all. He was already a real brick wall of a dude, but here he was, his face looking freshly stitched up all over. At a glance, I figured his grim new mug

had raised his gangster cred by a good fifty percent. I figured a guy like that didn't need to worry so much about his health; your average pathogen would take one look at the guy and flee the premises before risking a tussle with his immune system.

Then there was Mister Fidelio, who had returned without so much as a single stain on his shirt, let alone a physical injury. He didn't need to resort to Stefano's methods of immunity through deterrence; I think he could literally *punch the malady out of himself* if he wanted. If he ever died in battle, then that would be a veritable sign of the end times.

The two of them were *textbook* heavies. In the raid, Stefano's larger operation had meant that a few of his people had suffered injuries, but Mister Fidelio's party had such an easy job of it that he almost felt bad for being paid for his work. Apparently when they had heard the saint coming, the crooks had practically flung their bodies to the ground as they prostrated themselves in surrender.

They were right to, in my humble opinion. Only the greenest newcomers to Marsheim wouldn't know about Fidelio's legendary night of righteous justice. The deeper you waded into the city's underbelly the more intense your fear for the man. Fighting with him would burn you down to your component atoms; choosing surrender and begging for mercy left you a better chance at survival than any pathetic counteroffensive you could muster.

The problem for our poor villains was that once they were targeted, fighting Fidelio's party was inevitable. The other three members of Mister Fidelio's party had most likely caused similar scenes. It really reaffirmed to me what a deadly weapon fame could be.

"If one started talking nonsense to me...about an apple or day or some such...I would shut them up with a little cloud of pipe smoke..." Nanna added.

The Baldur Clan and their leader had completed their jobs with little issue as well. The irony of the situation was that she was manufacturing potential patients with all the suspicious concoctions she was cooking up. In all honesty, if she dared proclaim that she was a doctor, I'd be the first to shout out my objection.

“I see that although many of you have little need of a doctor, in the Empire we say that you should always have two doctors at hand,” Lady Maxine. “There’s an old expression: Just because the swallows have arrived doesn’t mean that summer has come with them.”

“A proverb, is it?” Nanna said. “Well, if you wish to hear some...*interesting* anecdotes...then I have plenty...”

Nanna’s interjection lay on the far side of rude, but Lady Maxine was a dab hand at dealing with rootless rogues and ignored the comment. I sensed a similar sense of control that I felt from those GMs who, while they enjoyed adding depth to a story, would never let pointless chatter derail it.

“Nobles and other Associations are rigid things that will not budge with limited evidence,” Lady Maxine said, returning the conversation to the matter at hand. “However, they will be more willing to talk with more evidence to the cause.”

In our manager’s words, the raid had brought a temporary halt to the dissemination of Kykeon, but it would also lay key groundwork in the information war behind the scenes that was to follow.

Generally speaking, no matter where in the Trialist Empire of Rhine you found yourself, you would see that it was well-managed with civilized folk. Unfortunately this love for law and order left it lacking in flexibility.

For those who found themselves on the lower end of the pecking order, there was nothing so detestable as paperwork. As infuriating as it might have been, it served to protect you. You wouldn’t find yourself with your head flying from your shoulders thanks to shoddy evidence or hearsay—well, apart from when you became the object of an abuse of power, where someone important chose to prioritize their own convenience.

On the flip side, this meant that if you didn’t have watertight proof or multiple pieces of evidence that didn’t contradict one another, it was difficult to bring your claim to those in power. Not only that, no matter how much you could plead, the Adventurer’s Association refused to show its register to any of the adventurers in its employ.

“Well, enough of that,” said Lady Maxine. “I fear that you all almost did too

well.”

In a twist of fate, the raid had simply been too smooth and successful. As the one who brought everyone together, I felt *responsibility* before any pride.

“Oh? You’re dissatisfied with our great efforts?” Miss Laurentius said with a huff. Lady Maxine waved at her to calm down.

There wasn’t any issue with the *raid itself*. It was what came after.

Unlike a literal fight to the death, in the battles waged between organizations, it was sometimes a problem if you were winning too much. Lady Maxine would have preferred having the jigsaw pieces laid before her over a slightly longer timeline than this. It was a little bit of a problem to have them all dumped into her lap at once.

There were three pieces of information that she wanted. First: where Kykeon was being made. Second: an estimation of Diablo’s military might. Third: any intel on the mastermind behind all this.

This was the general order of preference too. Intel on the one pulling the strings was lowest in priority because it was probably some local lord somewhere whose name would come to light after they were dispatched. For anyone related to the margrave, the only good local lord was one who had swapped sides or died.

However, with so much intel in her hands, the situation did a one-eighty a bit too quickly. Even a lowly farmer’s son like me understood that.

Imagine you’re playing a boardgame. What would you do if you were losing horrendously compared to your opponent? If it were me, as soon as I realized that no amount of strategizing would lead me to victory, I would change my game plan to annoy the shit out of whoever was in the lead. And who knew—if I managed to make them screw up enough, it could even land me a miraculous turnaround. The other option would be to be an endless thorn in their side and sap every drop of satisfaction from their victory.

This was an illogical, human way of dealing with the pain of loss.

“Although we have stopped the spread of Kykeon, albeit temporarily, we were too extreme in our might,” said Lady Maxine. “Our enemy may resort to

desperate measures.”

All of this theorizing applied particularly to the mastermind. During the raids, we had secured information, but it had been so sloppily hidden that name after name after name of involved parties popped up. Not only had we succeeded in securing information, but the more intel-focused folk among us—Mister Rotaru the Windreader and informant Schnee chiefly among them—had turned up a trove of data.

The GM had organized an easily winnable battle, but had accidentally left out way too much plunderable information, it seemed. If they were here right now, I’d shake them and tell them to stop deciding how much info to drip feed us based on dice rolls...

Jokes aside, even a single hint would allow our skilled informant to secure a ton of data. A single foothold was the first step on the road to the right answer.

Among the intel, it was unclear if there were innocent nobles drawn into the scheme in order to stir up discord, and so we needed to take it all with a grain of salt, but it was more than enough for us to get a picture of the shape of the enemy plot.

The enemy organization was made up of a wide variety of peoples—from extremists, even among the local lords, who thought poorly of the Empire, to immigrants from the Exilirat who remained ostracized by the Empire, to nobles who stood to gain from unrest in their own nation. Diablo was a multiheaded hydra, and that made them more of a pain to deal with.

It could be said that one of their flaws was that the more bloated an organization gets, the more any sense of unified order gets muddied.

Even in society, which functioned almost purely on personal interest, there were fools who forgot the fundamental need to *make money*. There were cases where even while a business was toppling, on the verge of bankruptcy, workers would quibble about pointless things, all the while ever delaying the decision of which buyer or supporter would save their business. I’d read so many such cases where the arguments dragged on for so long that the potential buyers all pulled out and the business fell into bankruptcy purely due to its own idiocy. It was enough to make you laugh.

Although Diablo had rallied together under the aim of toppling Margrave Marsheim's power, any sense of cohesion was impossible to maintain with such a tenuous and fractious coalition. They all had their own personal motives, and the only singular thought they shared was "Yeah, let's fight with the Empire!"

"At this point, the identity of those in Diablo is not important," said Lady Maxine. "We can expect that they are most likely hard-liners of the local lords of Ende Erde. The only thing that matters right now is that they are an enemy to the Empire."

What made the local lords difficult to deal with was that they were plentiful across Ende Erde and belonged to a vast number of different factions. There were the hard-liners that Lady Maxine mentioned, who wanted nothing but to stir up war with the Empire. Then there were the soft-liners who did nothing, simply waiting in the shadows for the right time to strike, until the day that the Empire finally withered away. The majority of the local lords found themselves in one of these two groups, but there were also a wide variety of smaller cadres; those who didn't care about whatever happened when their ancestors and the Empire first clashed in the first days of the Rhinian incursion westward, or those who leaned toward peace, merely trying to live as best they could under the Empire's rule. There were also the moderates who, while they didn't outwardly cause antagonism, kept a keen eye on any concessions the margrave made or tried to engineer situations that would cause him to lose power, with the eventual aim of toppling him.

Finally, there were the extremists—the ones who wanted to win with brute force. It was highly likely that these extremists were the ones who had pulled the trigger on the whole Kykeon plot.

"The hard-liners are a relic from an age where the local lords dreamed of smashing the Empire with a quick war," Lady Maxine went on. "It is almost certain that they wanted to keep Marsheim in the most pristine condition possible so that it could act as a base from which they could launch an attack on the Empire. However, imagine children who are told they can draw anything they like on a wall. There will be those who merely copy whatever it was the first child drew out of a desire to conform."

Among those who wanted a revolt in Marsheim, it was easy to understand

what the hard-liners wanted. This made them less dangerous to deal with. These members of Diablo were far more reasonable in their thinking in wanting a winnable war.

But such were the times. Even though most troops would be conscripted, this still was not an age where conflict could be solved in a more offhand, strategic manner like firing missiles at the capital of the enemy nation or by directly targeting factories and the like. A war that would bring a conclusion to a quick and definitive end to the enemy's control made far more sense.

Although a war would bring ruin to the cantons and noble territories of the pro-Marsheim faction, the same would be said about the local lords' land. This self-preservation helped keep them in check.

The problem we had dug up was with the Exilrat.

"It appears that the Exilrat's aim is *not* to replace the locus of control of Marsheim," Lady Maxine said.

In the raid, we had encountered two people who were thought to be key members of the Exilrat. However, it hadn't been possible to bring them in alive. One of them had been a terrifying menace who had slaughtered seven of the Heilbronn Familie's people on their own before finally perishing in a one-on-one battle with Manfred. The other had used some kind of magic tool to self-detonate.

This was only hearsay, so I won't go into detail, but it was Mister Hansel who had dealt with this suicide bomber. Even with the Exilrat member grabbing his shirt and blowing up right in his face, all he had to say was, "My eyebrows are singed... Guess I gotta shave 'em," worrying that it would only make him look scarier than he already was. What a guy—proper frontliners truly were tough as nails. Compared to him, I was far closer to your average person. I would've probably been nothing but ash on the floor after an encounter like that.

"In a number of bases, the aerosolizer tool was assembled and ready for use," said Lady Maxine. "None had been fitted with a mana crystal, but otherwise they were fit to use at a moment's notice, or so the report states. Stefano? The details, if you please."

"We turned up a buncha barrels filled with this bluish water," said Stefano.

“There were pipes leadin’ ’em straight to those magic tools. Oh, and they weren’t normal barrels either. They were huge, the kind filled with beer that you see in the Wine God’s temples.”

Despite losing the two potential members of the Exilrat who were near the heart of Diablo’s operation, we hadn’t come away with nothing—we had learned that the Exilrat’s aim was simply the *destruction* of Marsheim.

In addition to the two bases that Stefano and Mister Hansel had dealt with, there had been aerosolizers prepped at seven other locations. It had been Siegfried’s luck (for better or worse) that had led him to one of these—I was glad that it hadn’t accidentally gone off while he was there—and there had been sufficient proof that they had been ready to use them.

Naturally, we only had guesswork to go on, but it seemed that the Exilrat had hopped on board with the local lords’ evil schemes so that they could incite some large-scale terrorism.

Of course, it was impossible to know if this was something that the entire clan had decided on, but it was an irrefutable fact that at least the extremists of the clan wished to see Marsheim burn.

“Question for ya, Smokestack,” said Stefano. “You had a look, right? With what they had, Marsheim’d be cloaked in a haze for months, huh?”

“Indeed...” Nanna replied. “It was not...ideal... Looking at the size of the mana crystals...hmm...I suppose the smoke would still be cloaking the outer walls of Marsheim...even after half a year...”

Simply put, it was insane what they were planning. This would scare the pants off even the local lords and the nobles—both those who wanted to see chaos reign in Marsheim and those who had their own political schemes to fulfill—who were in on Diablo’s plot.

If the region surrounding Marsheim was rendered torpid for that long, the only thing that awaited anyone and everyone was a nightmare that served no one. Local order would come to pieces; the city streets would be lined with overdose victims. Those left over would be plunged into a Hobbesian frenzy. It would be hell on earth—the end of the city—pure and simple.

“If you will permit some brutal honesty, I think it would be worth forgetting Diablo for the moment. We ought to set fire to the tent grounds and burn every last member of the Exilrat to cinders.”

We could only give noncommittal groans to the manager’s heavy statement.

“But madam,” said Miss Laurentius, “that wouldn’t go well. We would only drive them deeper into their hidey-holes. Never mind that they have agents with full residency status within Marsheim, we’d have no hope of ferreting them out from the rest of the public. Wouldn’t such methods only create more chaos than we began with?”

“Laurentius, I appreciate the concern, and it is well-founded. I believe that at this stage it is absolutely paramount that we bring a close to this issue without alerting the citizenry. It would be all well and good for my own head to line the city walls due to my own shortcomings, but failure here would damage the reputation of every adventurer across the entire western reach.”

“If you truly don’t care what happens to you, why not use your connections to call in the army and crush them?”

“Because I do not wish to create any unrest in Marsheim. Imagine what would happen if even a peep of this reaches the ears of the common folk. The gates would be rammed in mere moments with citizens attempting to escape.”

Ahh, that’s right. Chaos among the citizens would play perfectly to the enemy’s favor. Even if we had cut them off from their superweapon, if we didn’t stop the fools who’d taken it up in the first place, then countless innocents would fall into despair.

To add insult to injury, the local lords would be overjoyed at seeing the pandemonium unfurl without them having to raise a finger and take the opportunity to make their move. If we didn’t stop this *soon*, all of our hard work would be for naught.

“Therefore, I wish to prioritize expunging the Exilrat,” said Lady Maxine. “Unfortunately, another issue had to crop up...”

“We have found that...diseased wheat is a key component...in the production of Kykeon,” chimed in Nanna. “That needs to be dealt with too...”

Nanna's eyes were even more unfocused than usual. After she spoke, she let out a deep sigh, and along with it a billow of smoke from her pipe. It was as she said—this extra cog in the works meant that the Kykeon issue would not simply be solved by bringing the hammer down on the Exilrat.

The evidence at hand suggested that however much they'd done to *execute* the plan to fog out the city, they had no hand in *producing* Kykeon. Even if every last member of the Exilrat were ratted out and crushed, whoever it was that knew how to concoct Kykeon might dash off into the shadows, ready to brew up some more revenge.

After however long, they would come back to Marsheim, and we would have no notion of when to expect the next Kykeon crisis to rear its ugly head. If Marsheim was engulfed in a debilitating drug cloud when we had all but forgotten about it, then everyone committing seppuku a hundred times over still wouldn't atone for our error.

"I wish to be perfectly certain about this," Lady Maxine said. "Diseased wheat is the key ingredient, yes?"

"It is..." Nanna said. "It has been an age since my studies on public sanitation...but I remember that one of the side effects of ergot poisoning...is similar to Kykeon's psychotropic effect..."

If the situation wasn't already enough of a headache as it was, Siegfried had found bags of diseased wheat—which some dealers had stolen to bake bread with—and had twigged to its real purpose. Kaya had held her head in her hands, berating herself for not realizing sooner. When Nanna had been informed, she had recalled what she had learned in her core classes at the College—again I was reminded of how magia truly were technocrats—and although she didn't grasp the exact processes that transmuted wheat blight into Kykeon, she had found that they were incredibly similar in makeup.

"The harvest has already begun," Lady Maxine said. "Even if we send out teams now to raze what we can, a lot has already most likely been taken away into storage. Blast... I feel the bile rising in my throat already..."

"U-Uh, I'm really sorry..." Siegfried murmured, evidently concerned for Lady Maxine's health due to the discovery he had personally made.

“Pay it no heed, Siegfried,” she replied, waving her hand to dismiss his concerns. “It was a small blessing that you informed us early enough to move into action.”

It was likely that what he’d found had *spared* her long-suffering stomach lining more than it had jeopardized it, purely thanks to the timing.

Hubertus, her bodyguard, had placed an infusion on the table. Lady Maxine gulped it down before setting it back down with a bang.

“In all honesty, this is a top priority too,” she said in a resounding voice. “Tomorrow I intend to meet with the margrave and get his permission to review all of Marsheim’s import logs. In recent years, a number of regions have yielded an inadequate land tax, supposedly due to bad harvest. With the situation as it is, they now seem suspicious to me.”

“They were providing a smaller land tax? Strange... The Harvest Goddess and the God of Wind and Clouds have been on good terms this year...” Mister Fidelio murmured with a frown creasing his brow. This in turn prompted a difficult expression of Lady Maxine’s own. I wondered if she simply just didn’t want to break it to such a moral man as him that the Empire would resort to less-than-honest measures to secure the public’s trust.

“For decades now, we have cited inclement weather, droughts, and water supply faults to overlook the local lords’ tax inconsistencies when we have needed to cement their backing. You understand, don’t you? It’s like giving pocket money to an unruly child.”

“Yes, but if they do untoward things with that money, then there was no point in giving it to them in the first place...”

This was one of many political measures that Margrave Marsheim had been implementing to ameliorate Ende Erde’s sticky political situation. It was a small carrot instead of the stick, but one that could prove poisonous in the wrong hands. I nodded along, hearing it laid out. If leeway was given on levies for certain cantons, they could discreetly harvest their diseased wheat unmolested, even if a magistrate from the Empire came to investigate their crop. Tax collectors were busy all year and wouldn’t pay it much heed either.

Wheat blight caused ears of wheat to blacken and decay, and was caused by a

fungus called ergot. If the ergot spread to barley or rye it would be easy to notice. You could easily see what had been infected and work to either spread or halt the infection.

Ergot didn't emerge with the budding of wheat. Instead it spread on already grown wheat, and that meant you didn't need a lot of it to get started. It wouldn't take too much work to contaminate a whole field. In those cantons untouched by the blight, the magistrate or village chief could just pay it no heed—writing it off as a fact of life that people *elsewhere* had to deal with—and instead focus on the busy task of tending the fields.

Back when the cause of this disease wasn't known, they simply left the land alone and focused on working areas that hadn't been infected yet, with the long aim of letting the disease run its course. I expected that folk who had moved to developing cantons had never heard the words “diseased wheat” in their lives.

“We should be able to produce a list of likely colluders based on their tax irregularities,” continued Lady Maxine. “It will be another night of staring at logbooks... I can feel the migraine coming on already, but it must be done.”

If Diablo slipped through our fingers, that would be the end of it. A wide-scale unmasking wouldn't go unnoticed. Any survivors or delivery agents who were on their way to sell their wicked stock would turn back around if they noticed that their buyer had been killed, and so information would eventually make its way back to the manufacturers. If they had two brain cells to rub together, then they would pack up their production line and run for the hills before they were found out.

We were running too short on time.

“Luckily for us, it should be fairly trivial to narrow down the list of viable venues for mass production. I'm right, aren't I, Kaya?”

“Ah! Yes, it is incredibly likely that they need a vast amount of firewood and water. It isn't something that any old person can make using their stove. There's only so many places where you could hope to consolidate that much of both resources.”

With all eyes on her, Kaya counted on her fingers as she listed possible

candidates, taking absolute care not to misspeak.

First, a river needed to be nearby. Production of Kykeon would require a ridiculous daily input of water, so this was pretty essential. It would have to take a considerable amount of *land* just to store all the blighted wheat. Given the sheer volume of Kykeon on the market in Ende Erde, odds were good that the supply originated from a huge centralized chain of production.

Simultaneously, such a site couldn't be built on too flat land—it would stand out and draw unwanted attention—and so it needed to be far away from most population centers, but not so far as to make delivery prohibitively costly. Anywhere too near vital roads or large Harvest Goddess churches would be bad, but somewhere totally unconnected with no roads to bring in resources would be too inconvenient.

Somewhere too arid would also be bad. Fungus like ergot was quite tough, but it grew weak without sufficient moisture in the air, and so areas where humidity would drop and dry winds would blow in the winter would severely reduce the quality of their product. We couldn't forget that Kykeon was being sold at a price that was far lower than the requisite materials, so it would be pretty likely that they wouldn't waste more money maintaining ideal conditions through magic. To cap it off, a widespread barrier would result in conspicuous mana reactions. They wanted to remain unnoticed, and so it was highly doubtful they would resort to magical means to protect their stock.

“We won't have to search through Ende Erde with a fine-toothed comb, from the sound of it,” said Lady Maxine after Kaya's explanation. “I feared that we would be searching for a needle in a mountain of haystacks, but this will make our mission significantly easier,” Lady Maxine said.

“All the same, it still isn't an insignificant number,” Mister Fidelio added. “Preparations will need to be made for a longer excursion.”

Although we had these wonderful factors helping to pin down our target, it wasn't so easy as getting a map of Ende Erde and putting a literal pin in it. They were a careful bunch—neither would they choose somewhere that would be easily sniffed out, nor would they risk losing everything in an accidental fire; it was highly likely they were operating out of multiple factories.

Even if Lady Maxine put her eye health, stomach health, and sleep on the table to narrow down possible candidates, if we sent people out, most would be sent on a fool's errand.

This wasn't ideal. Forgetting Mister Fidelio's easy comments on bringing justice to them, it would be an issue to have to commit to so many long journeys.

"Hey y'all, jus' leave it ta li'l ol' me," came a familiar voice.

As I was lost in thought, a white-furred bubastisian came and stood before me. She had been so silent that I thought she hadn't come today. Where on earth had she been hiding? I glanced at Margit for an answer, but my partner merely shrugged her shoulders, just as confused as I was.

"I'll do my own bit of diggin' and get that number down even further, manager. Though even I won't be able ta do it all by my lonesome, if ya catch my drift."

"Very well. Tell me what you require later and it shall be done, informant."

"You betcha. A simple thank you will do nicely as payment this time around," Schnee said before snickering.

As ever, I found her narrowed eyes impossible to read, but I was amazed by her ability to head back into her life's passion despite almost dying not so long ago. The healing algae inside her still hadn't fully broken down yet.

"Finding the factory is top priority," said Lady Maxine. "However, we have another equally important issue."

"Seriously? Two 'top priority' missions? Give me a break..."

The audhumbla's muttering went unanswered by everyone, but everyone knew what he meant.

This was all too common. You were going about your day, and then two or three urgent tasks were put onto your plate that needed to be finished *today*. When they held people's lives in the balance, it made perfect sense for multiple "top priority" tasks to exist at the same time.

As we worried if we would be able to cover all of it at once, the manager

brought out a likeness portrait.

...Whew, that was close. It had taken all the power I had to spare to stop myself from crying out, *Why the hell do you have a picture of that goth-loli?! in a frankly inhuman tone.*

“It took a bit of work, but I managed to convince another Association manager elsewhere to share this with me,” said Lady Maxine. “Goldilocks, this was the person who attacked you, am I right?”

“Y-Yes, it was,” I squeaked.

What was with my voice?! My brain must have been overheating at the sight of her...

But I was certain. This was the same woman who had smashed my arm to bits earlier today and had left me to weather this miserable convalescence.

I had given my own personal rundown of her details in my report and had even attached my own attempt at a likeness, but the one before me wasn't a copy of that. Judging by the penmanship, it had been drawn by someone with training in drawing bounty posters or likenesses for work. This world didn't have photographs yet, and your only way of getting a person's identifying features was a drawing like this or a list of descriptive bullet points.

This drawing allowed me to get a better look at the woman who attacked me today, but as I looked closer something was off. This wasn't an attempted copy of what I had drawn, nor was it a bounty poster that had been created recently. She looked younger—perhaps in her late teens.

Her eye-catching makeup had changed her impression somewhat, but I had been close enough to feel her breath on my skin in a fight to the death, so I knew. Her gaudy appearance had drawn my attention away from her features, but I *knew* that it was her. If I mentally added in thick makeup and a decade-plus of hellish battle, it'd be dead-on.

“I want all of you to remember this face. If you see her, do *not* let her escape.”

“Nee hee, it was quite a task gettin' intel on her,” Schnee added. “Her name is Beatrix Eugenia Friederike Brecht. As you might've guessed from all the

surnames, she used to be a li'l 'princess' of a well-off house.”

I was puzzled by the timeline. This was way too fast. I'd given my report this afternoon after receiving my emergency medical care. Even if the Association had a thaumogram, it just wasn't possible to source this information in a matter of hours. It had taken the immensity of the raid today for Lady Maxine to share with us the details of the adventurers' register, so it was highly unlikely that another manager elsewhere would be so willing to hand over classified information.

Judging by her age in this drawing, it must have been created just after she became an adventurer. If it had been stored for all this time, then surely someone she worked with—the manager or one of the receptionists—would have stood up for her.

What I was trying to say was that it would have taken ample time and evidence to convince whoever had held this information to part with it. Schnee's feline senses weren't so finely honed that she could read the future, were they?

“Her adventurin' history is as squeaky-clean as they come,” Schnee said. “She was registered with the Adventurer's Association in Luneburg and reached copper-green rank. She was a real trusted adventurer with a ninety-plus percent job completion rate. But, well, that explains why she's such a tough cookie.”

“Yes,” said Miss Laurentius, “she must be, to have done such a number on Goldilocks. She takes lives for a living, I presume?”

Schnee glanced over at me as answer enough to Miss Laurentius's question.

Deep breath, Erich. This is good! This is all the proof you needed that you weren't almost killed by a complete nobody who popped out of nowhere. It's something to be happy about!

By the way Schnee wagged her tail as she walked, I imagined that Beatrix was already a known quantity to her. She had most likely been working undercover in order to dredge up any information that she could and only thought it fitting to lay bare before others once she had made sure it was properly vetted.

Schnee truly valued the accuracy of her intel. Even when it came to an assassin that had almost ended her life, she refused to raise the alarm based on her gut or guesswork.

Indeed, we were able to head to the raid without any unnecessary presumptions or misplaced eagerness because we had only been told what we needed to know—we never had the leeway to make any unnecessary predictions, only given the appropriate amount of preparation.

All the same, I really wished that she had told us what she'd nearly turned up dead in that lot for in time for us to pass the excuse along to our prospective employers.

“The best assassins go unnamed,” Schnee went on. “Second-rate assassins lose themselves ta temper. Well, I don’t need to tell everyone here that, now, do I?”

Siegfried and Kaya looked like they *did* need an explanation, but I made a mental note to bring them up to speed later.

The thing was that people *didn't know* that the truly talented assassins were, in fact, assassins. Truly gifted murderers could skillfully erase the fact that a murder had even taken place at all, only raising questions when the erased party ceased showing up where they were expected, leaving their estimated time of death deeply ambiguous.

In the heroic stories, there were often passages that helped add awe to a villain’s wicked deeds explaining how they were feared for killing so-and-so, but in reality the fact that people knew the name of the assassin was already a big red mark on their reputation. After all, knowing someone’s face and background made it a lot easier to devise your response to them. As you pieced together relevant bits of intel, you could draw up an even better strategy to pin them to the wall.

“Well, should she come strollin’ into Marsheim, everyone’ll be on high alert,” said Stefano. “I don’t need to remember her face—I’ll strike her down before anyone can get in edgewise.”

Typical local gangster that he was, Stefano propped his jaw on his palm in a relaxed posture, speaking as if he were reflecting on some fun anecdote from

his past.

If you were plotting some kind of scheme, then the most important part was that no one found out about the plan in the first place. With this very obvious first rule, it made sense that a big noble who had hired a group of assassins or intelligence agents wouldn't know their names in almost all cases.

Consider, for example, my series of bouts with Miss Nakeisha during the last stretch of my tenure under Lady Agrippina. Marquis Donnersmarck, who had her entire clan in his pocket, was known as a philanthropist and a charitable man. No one was aware of the wide purview of his subordinates, or the depth and breadth of the intelligence network they managed.

A secret blade is most powerful because it is secret. If it hadn't been for that tortoiseshell cat, then Schnee would never have been saved, and it would have been a long time until I ever reached the core of this whole plot.

"But copper-green, eh... That explains why she can move between cities without being stopped," said Miss Laurentius.

"Quite... At that rank...you become a registered citizen...after all," said Nanna.

"Not only that, she did a real number on Erich," Mister Fidelio added. "I wonder if she turned down promotions. Ever since I reached sapphire-blue, I've stood out more than I wished to, with celebrities and whatnot knocking on my door. This far up the chain, you can really feel the way rank weighs you down and lifts you up in equal measure."

Adventurers were looked down upon, but once you were in the upper echelons it wasn't rare to receive requests that would span multiple cities or even nations. A high rank brought with it ease of movement through checkpoints. Adventurers' tags also were magically altered to act as a form of identification, and so were a valid item to use as a pass.

At the third rank of amber-orange, my clearance only covered Ende Erde, but when you reached copper-green—which was third from the top—you could pass through almost everywhere in the Empire unimpeded.

In other words, if you pretended that you were acting on behalf of a job, then you could go about your business unnoticed—unless someone caught you in

the act of trying to enter somewhere you were forbidden. All you needed to do was pretend that you were in good with some big-shot noble and you could do whatever you wanted without even the fear of having your name recorded in the entry log.

“Apparently she even worked in Marsheim when she was younger,” Schnee said. “She was here for two years, give or take, but then up and left, moving her base of operations a number of times afterward.”

Judging by the time frame, this had been back before anyone in this room was anyone important. Stefano had still been vigilantly waiting for the opportunity to usurp his uncle; Lady Maxine had still been assistant manager.

Hold on, had I even been born yet? No, she didn’t seem *that* old...

“If the records are correct, then she was only amber-orange while she was in Marsheim,” Lady Maxine said. “We had a mixed bag of adventurers at the time, and she stood out, but not all that much, so there isn’t too much on her. Usually records are disposed of if there hasn’t been anything of note within five years.”

Adventurers could change their registered Association, but it was simple for them to put in a request to do a little bit of extra work at another Association. Amber-orange was ample rank to bring a letter of recommendation from your registered Association to your target destination, but it seemed for some reason or other that Beatrix refused to request one.

“Gotta say, this task really took it outta me,” Schnee said. “Turns out she and you in the Fellowship of the Blade got a mutual connection.”

“Huh? We do?”

“Yessiree. She was a resident at the Snowy Silverwolf herself, once upon a time. John’s an honorable sort and not much of a chatterbox to start with, so it took some real *doin’* to get him to talk.”

I was surprised—I hadn’t even considered the possibility that my assailant had eaten at the same table and slept under the same roof that I had. As I thought about it, adventuring made for a fitting cover for a career killer. Carrying a weapon on you was part of the job; any suspicious-looking potions or magical tools could be chalked up as part of your kit. Nobody so much as quirked an

eyebrow if you and your coworkers read as strange or foreign—that was par for the course. As long as you weren't a fugitive, it made for a logical cover.

Now then, she was from an old family that had noble connections—I seemed to recall that her name was the same as a huge riverboat freight service turned retailer that had an outlet in Berylin—but for some reason or other had found herself an adventurer moonlighting as an assassin. Life sure was unpredictable.

No... Maybe I was overthinking it. Maybe it wasn't about going undercover—maybe she had ended up this way because her plans hadn't panned out.

In my own life, there had been a number of moments where I was aware that I needed to steel my resolve and follow through with my decision. When I had gotten too involved with the College while in Berylin; when I had almost died in the battle against that masked man—my dream of becoming an adventurer had nearly been snuffed out more times than I could count.

Even *after* becoming an adventurer, I had met with a similar sort of danger once...no, three times now, I would wager? There was that time in the summer after I had become an adventurer, where if I had continued to school annoying folk who had come to pick on me, my character sheet would've been carried off in a different direction. Then there was that time after Elefsina's Eye had just started circulating, where I had been thinking that all this narco business really wasn't my idea of adventuring, but if I had run away I would've had to deal with the lifelong hurt of my cowardice. Finally, there was the much more recent cusp of the Kykeon crisis. If I hadn't decided to make use of my connections—as much as it embarrassed me to—I would have ended up on a boring job dispatching suspicious character after suspicious character leading to quite the depressing end.

Making preparations to run away; resorting to senseless violence because *thinking* through the problem at hand was too much for me... If I'd surrendered myself to these urges, I was sure I would have eventually found myself entangled by fate's refusal to let me go.

I wondered if Beatrix had suffered much the same fate.

“Whatever the case,” said Schnee, “the state of ol' Goldilocks Erich here should be enough ta illustrate her talents.”

“Would it be uncool to try and blame the fact that I was outnumbered five to one...?” I said, but naturally her portrait gave no reply. All I could do was shrug at Schnee’s pointed finger.

I was sure that Beatrix had been holding some of her own cards close to her chest, but I had still been pushed to the brink of death. It was looking like I would need to bring out a few more of my trump cards if I didn’t want my story to be brought to a close the next time we met.

“She ain’t just a skilled fighter, she’s also *careful*,” Schnee went on. “In this case, the only evidence left of her presence was Erich’s own wounds. She won’t want to leave her business unfinished...”

“I see... They want to destabilize our command structure by taking heads, do they? We’ve done our share of similar work in the past,” Miss Laurentius said as she leaned back on her three-seater, causing it to creak under her weight. “It’s pretty effective,” she went on. “There have been ogres in the past who, surrounded by enemies on all sides with a strong sense of cohesion, had thrown down their helmets with a smile, happy that they had finally found a place to die. The way I hear it, usually they went out satisfied.”

With few worthy individuals to challenge, ogres were powerhouses in their own right. There were stories of many battles where a single ogre warrior had completely turned the tides of a struggle.

When ogres got serious and charged straight into the enemy flank, with a full readiness to face death head-on, their fervor for bloodshed would shatter their opponents’ strategy. Of course, this ridiculous approach cost ogrish lives aplenty, but weighted against the glory to be won, cowardice rarely if ever won out.

Man, they really are like a bunch of coked-up Shimazu clan types... Talk about scary...

Miss Laurentius chuckled, but it was exactly as she had said. It was highly likely that Diablo would start picking away our most prestigious and significant players in the hopes it would loosen our grip on the situation.

“Basically, just watch out to not get offed, got it?” Miss Laurentius said.

“Gotta say, it makes it easier fer me if people get the picture quicker,” Schnee said. “As she said, sleep with one eye open, folks.”

The warning was apt. The worst thing right now would be for our coalition heads to be assassinated in their sleep. It would spell disaster for our alliance, and we had worked too hard to cobble it together in the first place.

It would also leave us with fewer pieces to work with. We would have to either A) go crying to Margrave Marsheim at this late stage in the game, or B) fight on knowing full well that our foe could do something terrifyingly unexpected at any time. That was a future that we definitely wanted to avoid.

Clans were cults of personality, from a certain point of view—they hinged on a relationship between one leader and many subordinates. That leader’s charisma, power, and resources held the clan together. What would happen if that head was killed? Without a leader you didn’t have an *army*; you had *irregulars*—directionless rabble. They would disintegrate in a matter of days.

We were dealing with opponents who had almost killed me the day after Lady Maxine had praised me for being the glue of this alliance and told me not to die. Considering my survival, it wasn’t too far-fetched to imagine that they would target another clan head next. Stefano or Nanna were likely targets, as the Heilbronn Familie didn’t have a proper internal political structure of their own and the Baldur Clan existed purely due to Nanna’s presence. Man, I would worry less if either of them were as strong as Mister Fidelio, or at least as tough as Miss Laurentius.

“That is the situation with which we are faced,” said Lady Maxine. “Our plan is to expunge the Exilrat while simultaneously isolating the enemy’s production base. I will play my part to make sure the enemy never has the opportunity to remove any of us from play. I ask you all, the clan leaders here today, to take sufficient precautions.”

Lady Maxine announced the end of the meeting—having decided that she had brought us sufficiently up to speed on how up to our ears we all were—and was wrapping things up, when suddenly there was a quiet knock on the door to the reception room.

Hubertus, who was standing guard next to it, noticed a letter pushed under

the door. This was your typical communication method if you wanted your message to be delivered without actually making yourself known.

Hubertus checked the letter then handed it to Lady Maxine. As she read it, a wrinkle creased her forehead.

“An emissary from the Exilrat...wishing to explain their situation? What is this?” she muttered.

I had reached for my red tea—long since gone cold—now that the meeting had reached a breaking point, but I almost dropped the cup out of shock.

Internally I begged for at least one person to praise me for holding my tongue and not spilling a drop...

[Tips] There are many positions that allow you to cross administrative borders without drawing suspicion. These include but are not limited to caravan owners, bards, scholars, and of course, adventurers.

The vampire had pondered long and hard about what he needed to do. It was hardly an *uncommon* thing to feel ashamed of your family; the Rhinians had a whole complicated compound word for it. Still, this was far more grave than anything the idiom was fit to describe.

He wasn't born in the Empire. To reach the land of his birth, you would have to travel far, far south, and upon reaching the Verdant Inner Sea, you would have to keep heading east until you arrived at the shores of the Black Inner Sea. It was a distant land, one any Rhinian would struggle to name.

And in this land, vampires were subaltern—less than human.

While the prevailing attitude there and in Rhine was rooted in the same contempt for vampires' mythological ex-mortal origins—recounted in the Empire in the infamous fable “The Man Who Swindled the Sun”—the actual reasoning differed in execution. In his homeland, vampirism was seen as a corruptive influence, an impurity begetting an impure race. Many credited their conditional immortality to dark and heinous rites.

The old tales were plentiful—new vampires were born from mortals who had

partaken in the blood of plague victims; they were created after seven days and seven nights spent on the rope after hanging themselves; they were illegitimate children, born from the womb of a corpse. Each story was meant to put the fear of all the gods in one's heart.

Believed to be accursed creatures given unnatural luster on a diet of impure blood, they were debased as “strigoi.” And so, this man, like many others before him, left the place of his birth and found himself in the Empire—a land where he would finally be treated as a person. Many an immigrant could tell the same story.

In his homeland, every day had been a new hardship, but here at the Empire's western edge, people merely saw him as a sickly-looking soul who could not function under the light of day. In comparison to what he had once known, it was paradise. He sullied his hands with dirty and disreputable work to stay there, yes, but in his own way he fought to stay as much out of affection as desperation.

However, his life had taught him something. He had learned firsthand of the agony of being abandoned by everything familiar. He knew few hardships greater than to be driven from your home, and the ceaseless slog toward somewhere, *anywhere* livable.

But *this*? It wasn't right.

The vampire would be among the first to admit that Marsheim wasn't kind to its immigrants. All the same, it never veered into active cruelty.

It wasn't as if he was barred from the city behind the walls. If he went through the proper channels and managed to scrounge together some money and a proper guarantor, then even his immigrant status wouldn't prevent him from registering as a citizen.

The city was inconsistent, for better or worse, but as long as you conformed to the local rules, you could reasonably expect to be treated fairly. You just needed to know when to swallow your complaints with the Marsheim way of doing things.

And so this vampire—the man known as Zwei to the Exilrat—decided that it didn't matter if his decision caused internal friction. He would take the matter

to the Association and save his second shot at home.

It took the death of one of his fellow councillors and the replacement of another with a political decoy after their injury for Zwei to finally realize something: a contingent within his own, no longer able to bear their mistreatment, had resolved to bring Marsheim to a swift end.

It had been a complete shock to him. Even the stupidest among them knew that they needed Marsheim more than Marsheim needed them. The Empire was a big place, but he doubted there was anywhere else that would tolerate the size and scope of the tent grounds.

All the same, he understood their pain—the depths of their anger at being maligned and discriminated against; the difficulties and worries of a life with no one to depend on.

Even Zwei, born with a vampire's resilience, still bore deep mental scars from the agonies he'd endured in his homeland. Those scars had scabbed over, almost forgotten, but if he scratched at them, the bitter urge to see everything around him burn welled and wept. Yet anger turned to shame as he realized the futility of so cruelly destroying the land which had given him another chance at life.

These thoughts had propelled him to the Association, that he might lend a helping hand—no, that he might *seek penance* for what he had done. Zwei was ready to bare his body to the glow of morning and be reduced to naught but ashes if it meant bringing this foul Kykeon business to a close.

He had another mission: to pass on to the Association's leadership that Exilrat had no united front behind the plot. The clan was founded on mutual aid. Any money they earned was spent on clothes and food for elderly folk unfit to care for themselves. Savings were sent to former compatriots and family from their motherlands. The largest portion was spent in teaching Rhinian to their children, so that they would be able to integrate with Marsheim more easily than their ancestors.

It was a ridiculous proposition to state that everyone in the Exilrat wished for Marsheim's annihilation.

Zwei didn't know the exact numbers of the collaborators within his clan, but

even if it were more than half, the majority of them had merely been seduced by the prospect of earning a trifle more coin toward their ever-gnawing expenses—what was one more dirty job, if it kept you fed another day? By his figuring, he assumed there could be no more than ten percent among the Exilrat who knew entirely what evil they were complicit in. They were the only truly despicable and cruel folk to be found among his kin.

There was Funf, once a local lord of Ende Erde. He had been full of hatred for the Empire, constantly bemoaning the fact that he had once been a *king*. Zwei had received news that Funf had died today.

Then there was Sieben, whose long journey to Marsheim had cost him his twin brother. Rumors abounded that Sieben had been made a plaything by Imperial nobles in the past, but in Zwei's eyes that could hardly excuse him for avenging himself upon the *whole city*.

Even Drei was on board with sinking Marsheim. He told anyone who would listen that before long, *all* the Exilrat would be marked for death and hunted like animals by the state. But Zwei couldn't square such claims with his own lived experience.

Now, Zwei wasn't a complete dreamer. He knew that Marsheim wasn't a heaven on earth—merely a corner of the Empire where its bureaucratic power was still light on the ground. But it was better than that.

The taverns often served vinegary booze, the women in the pleasure quarters weren't easy on the eye, the merchants dealt in dirty money and skimmed on change. All the same, none of them called Zwei vermin at the first flash of fang.

Zwei ran the calculations over in his head but still couldn't reason his way into being on board with *gassing Marsheim*. He would repent for the shame his "family" had brought upon them all and save this city. Zwei forged ahead, certain that if he explained the situation to the Association manager, she would show some sympathy.

"What reason do I have to believe you?" she said after he had finished explaining himself. "You do realize the situation, don't you? I wouldn't put it past you to waste our time when that is our most valuable asset right now."

A sense of ephemerality trumped beauty for this woman whose hair was

populated with ever more grays and whose cheeks were hollower than they were before. Zwei could sense the quiet rage underneath the surface as she spoke.

When he had arrived at the Association building, Maxine had been engaged in a meeting with adventurers from various clans of Marsheim. The very same adventurers who had killed his fellows just this morning. Even as his hands trembled with the letter in them, the vampire knew that he couldn't back down. If he did, the tent grounds would be engulfed in fire. It had never been the warmest of welcomes, but all the same Marsheim had granted them a place to live.

Zwei's pride and very life were worthy sacrifices if it meant stopping the wheels that were currently in motion.

"Allow me to demonstrate my resolve," Zwei said.

His cloak cast a shadow on the inside, blocking any light from reaching his face, but here before Maxine and the adventurers, Zwei revealed his true face. The councillors of the Exilrat valued anonymity above all—to them this was akin to death. Zwei continued unperturbed and reached into his mouth.

And then, he pulled.

Into his hand he placed four canines—the symbol of his race and the very crystallization of his pride.

Pulling one's teeth with one's hands was excruciating, but the pain alone was hardly the point; by removing or damaging their canines, a vampire sacrificed much of their heightened vitality and resilience. Such methods were common in the lands to the far east of the Empire—a show of surrender and vulnerability in the hopes that it might deter further violence. The practice was not *unknown* in the Empire. The celebrated Lampel the Bald had removed his own fangs and offered them to the Night Goddess as the first part of his penance—but it had long since died out.

In this moment, it didn't matter what logic ran behind it. All that mattered was whether Maxine understood the depth of his desire to tell the truth.

"E-Eins and Vier agree with me," Zwei said, with some difficulty. He cupped

his hands under his chin to avoid dirtying the carpet with his blood. Zwei literally forced the words out as he made his request. “If I have your aid...then I can prevent the others from acting foolishly. So please...please protect the tent grounds. Even if you must...scatter my ashes under the morning sun...I beg you not to harm or drive out the immigrants of Marsheim...”

“I shall consider it,” Maxine replied. “Before that I will need information on this affair’s instigators.”

Through his brutal honesty, Zwei had received Maxine’s pardon.

The code of law would find Zwei guilty, but Maxine refused to stick so closely to the book. There were three reasons why she didn’t pass judgment on him now.

The first was the extenuating circumstances leading one of the Exilrat’s councillors to present himself today. Further, if she killed Zwei now, the survivors would most definitely grow desperate and realize their end was nigh. Lastly, someone would have to pacify the people of the tent grounds. In the long run it would be better to keep the one person who would be grateful for the task alive to do it.

Imperial morals and the spirit of political compromise spared the Exilrat from utter destruction, but there would be few who would ever bring up the events of this evening.

[Tips] A bountiful nation with permeable borders will always attract immigrants. The Empire maintains an effective relationship with immigrants through a stance that remains unchanging whether these immigrants are present or not.

Nothing made me more uncomfortable than watching people work overtime while I was the only one sitting back relaxing. Of all the fighters in the Association reception room, I was the only one with nothing to do. With my left arm out of commission I would be of no use, so my seniors in the business kindly told me to stay put and get better.

It pained me to stay here doing nothing, but in all honesty it only barely edged

out the actual physical agony of my wound. Kaya told me that taking painkillers or interfering with my fever would slow the healing process, so I sat there without even a cooling salve on my forehead.

The fuzzy feeling in my head told me that the beginnings of my fever would probably come into full force in about thirty minutes or so. I might have been somewhat confident that I could swing my sword with my one good arm, but I would be nothing more than dead weight if I was out there on the front lines.

Lady Maxine had also kindly allowed me to stay the night, claiming that there was no better place to hunker down with a price on your head. I swallowed my pride and focused on letting my body mend.

“Feelin’ fidgety?” came a voice from below the sofa I was using as a bed.

Something white flitted across my vision. It was Schnee’s tail, swishing before me as she sat on the floor, flicking through the documents she was reading.

“Well, yeah...” I replied.

It was the most natural choice for our informant to be staying here too. She herself had announced that she was more brains than brawn; it would be madness to send our ally best qualified to unveil our enemy’s secrets into the field of battle—doubly so when dealing with assassins. They might have made the call to retreat this morning, but it was highly likely that they were waiting for the perfect moment to strike and bring our whole organization tumbling down.

They had sussed out that I was the newest and weakest link among this distinguished group of adventurers and had come for my head first. Schnee had to be nearly as high up on their hit list. It’s how I would have done it in their position. They still had the upper hand while their headquarters were still unknown to us, and so killing the informant would buy them the most time. I would’ve tried a second or third time to get the job done, if I were in their position. That said, it had been a while since the first attempt. Had they given up? Or was Schnee avoiding attacks without realizing it? Or, most likely, had she taken measures to avoid being targeted? I had no idea—this informant truly was unfathomable.

“I get how you’re feelin’, but you gotta put up with it,” Schnee said. “You’re

the boss, after all.”

“I understand in theory,” I replied. “But I can’t logic my way out of these feelings.”

Schnee had evidently sensed my unrest. She started batting at my nose with her tail. *What makes the swishing tail of a happy cat so irresistible to grab?*

“It’s a soldier’s job ta march, and a leader’s job ta wait.”

“Don’t worry, I am well and truly aware of a soldier’s desire to bust down the castle gate themselves and lay waste to everything in sight thanks to a bubbling impatience.”

From now to my very first days as an adventurer, I’d taken up a position on the front lines out of admiration for those who led from the front. This was the first time that I had been the only one left behind. I couldn’t hope to quell my restless heart.

The habits of my younger heart had seeped into my soul. I *knew* on paper that only a piss-poor leader *forced* themselves into the fray with anyone, especially their subordinates, when they could barely stand. All the same, my instincts shrieked at me for lying around doing nothing. No matter how many times I told myself that I should rest like a good patient while Siegfried filled in for me, I just couldn’t get to sleep. It wasn’t just the thrumming pain in my arm. I simply couldn’t switch off my brain.

I wondered how long it would take for me to accept my role as the leader and zonk out while my allies did their jobs in my absence. Back in my previous life, I had moaned about my overly paranoid boss who stuck his nose into our affairs, wondering why he wouldn’t just be a good *manager* and wait until we were done. My past self would laugh at me if he could see me now.

“Don’tcha worry ’bout a thing, ’kay?” Schnee said. “Saint Fidelio’s leadin’ the march! Not even those assassins could scratch him.”

I felt something soft and warm on my shin. From her position on the floor, Schnee had leaned her head back onto my leg.

“Plots and schemes are fragile when it comes to actually tradin’ blows,” she went on. “Them choosin’ to start an all-out battle would mean givin’ up any

advantage our intel gave 'em. This whole thing would have to be decided by a li'l brawl."

"And in Marsheim, anyone who could beat the saint's party in a fight..."

"...There is no such animal."

It was an exceedingly pat way to put it, but I was in total agreement. At sapphire-blue, Mister Fidelio was the highest-ranked adventurer in Marsheim. Nobody in the whole city matched his pure power.

Of course, it would be foolish to say that the noble and single-minded saint was the *best* adventurer in all of Ende Erde.

Mister Fidelio only really got involved with the final stages of large-scale plots like these—I expected that many evildoers thought long and hard about how *not* to get him involved—and he couldn't be everywhere at once or cover a lot of ground on short notice. On top of that, he had his inn to run; he needed time to get ready and couldn't sustain a long, drawn-out war.

Still, he was undeniably the heaviest hitter in the whole game in these parts. Despite his lack of noble status and the absence of hundreds of troops, the master of the Snoozing Kitten was a well-trained and powerful adventurer, not to be angered under any circumstances. I had only faintly sensed the depths of his strength through our sparring sessions, and even in practice matches he had me easily beat.

There were three people I could compare him to: the ogre Lauren, who taught me the meaning of fear; Lady Agrippina, whose presence in this world felt like a fundamental error in its source code; and Lady Leizniz, who, under her skin, was nothing more than a massive ball of mana.

Mister Fidelio existed *close* to their realm.

That didn't make him any less terrifying. He was a monster; the kind of threat that, if he willed it, could introduce his foes to conditions resembling the surface of the sun. This power put him up on the shelf with the other Great Terrors of the world, yes, but what made him scary was that he was a hero-level adventurer who could just turn up like a stray cat wherever it pleased him.

There were a number of similar characters back at the TRPG table—

wandering adventurers who had pretty much maxed out their strength, but didn't wish for much and instead went about untethered with their adventurers' tags hanging from them. It was way too easy to fall for such seemingly harmless monsters.

"It's all turned into a pretty dull affair all at once, eh?" Schnee said. "They're gonna fess up an' apologize or settle on a more 'fitting' end for their li'l dream."

"A desperate last-ditch attempt, I'd wager."

"Yep. With him there, they won't wanna dash off somewhere to plot another round."

I cast my mind back to Zwei—a man with a *frustratingly* rugged sort of handsomeness. I'd had to deal with him after his subordinates had decided to make a project of harassing me through the summer of last year. Despite having tasted defeat at my hands once already, he was still one of their highest-ranking members. I doubted that he would be so irrational just because I had kicked him about a little back then.

The Exilrat had drawn the displeasure of the entire Adventurer's Association, and so it was clear to everyone that the saint had rocked up to their door due to an inability to stay quiet any longer. Now, the question was, if they had someone with a stat spread as busted as Mister Fidelio's, would the whole plot surrounding Kykeon have evolved as it had?

The answer was no. If the crazed fool who wanted to bring destruction to Marsheim had the personal power to put it into action, then it made zero sense for them *not* to do so by their own hands. They at least would have found such a powerful ally before proceeding to the foolish plan of dispersing Kykeon.

The fact that I could lay back and relax here at the Association was proof enough. If a beast on the same level as Mister Fidelio's party was clashing with him right now, you would be able to hear the echoes of their battle from leagues away.

"But...were we not good enough?" I said.

"Hm? Whatcha tryin' ta say?" Schnee replied. She twisted her head to look at me—in such a manner that no mensch could twist their spine—while her body

still faced forward. Her narrow eyes met with mine.

“I was wondering whether you felt uneasy involving only the Fellowship with drawing this whole thing to a close.”

“Ah, I getcha now.”

Schnee flittered her ears, as if to brush off my silly question. She crossed her legs and in the next moment began scratching her ear with her leg.

“This whole thing ain’t over yet. I got him involved ’cause at this stage it was easiest. But when yer truly in a pinch, one little piece ain’t gonna cut it. Especially in this whole shebang.”

“A pinch?”

“Even with Fidelio on our side, he can only take down one base at a time. You get it, don’t ya, Erich? If we take our sweet time, then the enemy’s gonna pack their bags and scamper off. You’d hate for Diablo to keep on changin’ their tack, changin’ their drug, pokin’ at us again and again.”

Schnee was positively certain that one swift battle would never be enough to bring an end to this whole plot. We couldn’t just “cut the Gordian knot” and be done with the whole thing. There were too many antagonists in play, their schemes interleaving and compounding beyond any one person’s ability to navigate them, let alone conquer them. Kykeon, Diablo—these were only sides to the tangled mess that we were dealing with. Even if we cut a string or two, threads from elsewhere in the plot would come to patch up the holes.

Just like how the mold on bread ran deeper than what you could see, merely scooping out the visibly affected part would leave the invisible mycelium that remained. At least with bad bread you could burn it or compost it; we had no such option with Marsheim.

“That’s why I stayed patient ’til I found a tough group of fellas who could fight more than just one battle, journey as far as they need to, and take their licks and pop right back up.”

Schnee needed time enough to gauge *exactly* how deep the contamination ran before lopping off the infected part. She loved this city. She would accept no substitutes. So she’d kept her attention on the bigger picture. While we

were focused on discussing the fruiting bodies, she was looking down on both the bread and the tray in which it was sitting.

Cutting off the infected part swiftly was best for the rest of the batch, after all. I gathered that it was her own personal feelings for Marsheim that had led her to try and deal with this situation as surreptitiously as she had. I hadn't yet developed the same level of attachment for this place, but I could easily tell that her level of dedication and devotion was something else.

"You chose to stay once already, so sit tight for just a bit longer, Erich," Schnee said.

"You really see everything, don't you?" I replied after a pause.

"Nee hee, what can I say? Cats know a thing or two."

I couldn't believe that she knew that I had once truly considered leaving Marsheim. It wasn't as if she overheard me—I hadn't even told Margit. She'd just worked it out by watching my disposition and choice of words.

It was a great relief having her on our side, but *man*, she terrified me just as much.

"This whole affair's made up of bits and bobs, and each run super deep. I know that even if I'll ol' me was to work myself to the bone, then I'd never get to the end of the lies and the schemes."

As she leafed through the documents the manager had given her—all stamped with "Reproduction Prohibited"—Schnee's profile looked terribly sad.

"But y'know, I'm doin' this is for a specific kind o' revenge and reconciliation. It might kill me, and there ain't no goin' back, but I figure if that's the price I pay, it's worth payin'."

Schnee's words hinted at a past that she wasn't yet ready to reveal to me. Perhaps it was more accurate to say that her instincts as a professional had told her that merely teasing at it would lodge the question in my brain, lingering at the edge of my peripheral vision. Even as she lost herself in her own memories, she still managed to probe at my own sentimentality too.

At any rate, I was a fan of this city in my own way too. I would see this whole

scheme to the end.

“By the way,” she said, “how’s your arm doin’?”

“Kaya said I’ll be back in one piece in three days. In the meantime, it hurts like nothing else.”

Thanks to all the germs for nasty little potion ideas I’d sown in her mind, Kaya had cottoned onto the fact that my own mana pool wasn’t insignificant, and so she’d cooked up a special potion that would essentially force my body to heal itself. However, it was a risky brew—one she wouldn’t trust most folk to handle. If your average Joe were to use it, they could die from mana depletion. Therefore, out of the whole Fellowship, it was reserved for Kaya and I. We kept a tight lid on it, as we knew that if word got out about this “miraculous three-day cure-all,” no one in the Fellowship would have another moment’s peace from the crowds of prospective buyers. We didn’t need that kind of heat on us.

And so thanks to her, despite the gruesome appearance of my injury, I was due back in battle before all too long.

“I thought you weren’t allowed to smoke?”

“It’s okay, I’ve not actually put any leaves inside. Just keeping my mouth occupied, really.”

I had been holding my pipe in my mouth in the hopes it would occupy my attention and placebo effect my way to feeling better, but it didn’t work without any smoke. I wished I could at least light up some calming herbs, if I couldn’t resort to painkillers...

“Won’t do no good if you don’t relax and get better.”

“I know. My arm is my livelihood. I’ll stay put for three days to keep it.”

“We’re gonna need your help, so ya better steel yer nerves while ya can.”

I myself had laid similar harsh realities on my own injured Fellows. I didn’t mind taking what I dished out. After all the beatings I gave the rookies on top of sending them out into battle, it wouldn’t be cool if their leader started bawling due to a silly broken bone.

“At this rate I think I can narrow our targets down to five locations,” she said.

“If things all go to plan, then I can get that to three—and I’ve got two just about locked in.”

“That would be amazing. An adventurer needs a destination, after all.”

As a renowned strategist whose name and circumstances escaped me at the moment once put it, an ordinary person at hand was a thousand times more useful than an absent hero. I couldn’t even recall if they were from this world or my last, but the fact of the matter was that their words dripped with truth.

It didn’t matter how strong you were; if you had nowhere to direct your skills, then you were naught better than a scarecrow. No end of adventures could end up falling into your lap. You needed the discernment to tell the ones that’d leave you tilting at windmills apart from the real deal.

I was well and truly grateful for the ample wisdom of so many past leaderly types available to fall back on.

“That manager’s really somethin’, huh?” Schnee went on. “She had way more dirt to dish than I woulda guessed.”

To be honest, this time around I did feel like I’d become a cheap adventure hook dangled by the GM in front of Mister Fidelio to spur him into moving things forward, but it beat not having an adventure at all. There were tons of GMs who resorted to painstaking prep just to flesh out NPCs who were only tasked with giving the real hero a little push, like me.

“Anyhoo, if I get some juicy tax records, then I oughta save a good half day.”

“Why are you looking at me like that?”

“Now, now, Erich... You can’t ride a horse one-handed, can ya?”

While I was idling in my thoughts, she said something that made my ears prick up. *A good half day? Save? From what?*

“And if all goes swimmingly, then I’ll be able to get this wrapped up in a good day and a half! If I’m bein’ honest, I’d go *myself* and have a look-see, but I’m just about tied down. But if we get the list down to less than five candidates, then that’ll make moppin’ up go real quick.”

“W-Wait, a day and a half to narrow the list down? Hold on... You’re saying

this other work needs to be finished in that time?”

“Exactamundo, Erich! If they get the slip and hide away, that won’t be swell, now will it? While I’m doin’ my readin’, y’all will get your preparations done and get ready to leave within the day. Otherwise it’ll be too late.”

Yes, it was true that we had quashed a whole swathe of bases in a day, but the enemy’s scope was huge. There were bound to be runaways and they must have had their own way of passing word along when they were in a tight spot. There must have been those who had jumped ship, having realized that the hammer was coming down in Marsheim. We had attempted to limit this chance as much as possible with our quick and focused raid, but even a perfect plan is only perfect in theory.

Was Schnee really insinuating that we had to go out and start running around *again* to snag people involved with Kykeon production? Seriously? I had envisaged today being a long-distance race, sure, but was Schnee really saying that this was a marathon for everyone involved?

“We could probably get one squad to crush two or three spots if they’re nearby... It might be hard if you’re only movin’ as a group of five, but you can take turns fightin’, no?”

“H-Hold on, Schnee...”

“We gotta ask the manager to prepare some horses and a carriage... This is gonna be a big little trip!”

I tried to stop her monologuing, but suddenly that fatigue I had been so craving earlier washed over me, and I couldn’t even reach out my hand. My fever must have finally hit—flipping the off switch on my body to prevent me from doing anything too unruly.

“Hmm... I reckon odds are good Diablo’s runners are gonna be workin’ on zero sleep, movin’ their evidence all day, but does that really change my figurin’? Aha, but they’re a big org. They’ll be in trouble if they use their thaumograms now. So, yup, guess we gotta get boots on the ground ASAP.”

Nooo... A terrifying strategy with a punishing itinerary was coming together before my very eyes! I knew that we didn’t have a choice and letting people slip

through the cracks would cause headaches down the line, but I could already tell that the Fellowship was going to kvetch up a storm when I broke the news to them!

I wanted to ask Schnee to afford me a moment's consideration as she assembled her plan, but I felt my eyelids closing. Her voice transformed into distant alarm bells.

I couldn't head out as I was, so I would have to rely on my clan. Our little celebration tonight would be their last break for a while. I expected that we'd be pulling one or two all-nighters to boot. I decided that it would be better for my health to give the orders (as much as it pained me to do) from the safety of my bed.

I had no choice but to consider the delicate balance that was required of my position. I couldn't be too hasty and I couldn't be too caught up in wanting to be *there* all the time, or things from here on out wouldn't be any fun. I needed to curb my impatience and grit through this brutal collective deadline.

But all the same, our clan was full of good kids. If it was for justice—and if Lady Maxine footed the majority of the bills—they wouldn't say no.

They would probably moan about me behind my back, but as long as they got the job done, I could deal...

[Tips] Hit points simply illustrate your proximity to being rendered out of action. Zero HP doesn't necessarily equal death. Should an emergency call for it, it's possible to suppress one's usual instincts and force yourself to push on.

“Now that's not good...”

The assassin was high up in the air, one of her legs hooked onto a spire and the other resting lower down, as she stared out at the tent grounds. The problem? They weren't burning, there wasn't all-out chaos—the view seemed positively *peaceful*.

Thanks to Zwei's heartfelt pleading, the adventurers had decided to throw out their plan to storm the community. At this moment, the Exilrat were presenting

the evil handiwork of Drei and Sieben for the adventurers to deal with.

A number of agents had been dispatched in the case of an emergency, but at this stage in the game it was highly doubtful that these Exilrat adventurers would even want to lay down their lives all for the sake of stirring up chaos. Those fools who had been caught up in the assassins' client's plot would never see their dreams of revenge upon the world fulfilled. All they would receive for their efforts was being put to justice by those they'd once called their fellows.

"Tch... This is exactly why I told them not to bother using these outlanders..."

With the situation as it was now, there was no hope of a sudden spark to ignite the flames of war. It was too far gone. Not even their undercover agents—workers and intel, rendered useless—could make a meaningful move now. The tent grounds were a settling ground for those who had fled from their homes. Those people that put their lives on the line should have known that engineering long-term gain at potentially tremendous short-term cost would be beyond the pale to most among their number.

"This puts using our thaumograms out of the question too... Now that they've got the slimes moving in the sewers, we have to assume they have contingencies in place against our magical assets..."

All the same, they would have made good cinders to set Marsheim alight. As Beatrix released her grip, she thought it was a shame that these pieces hadn't been put to better use.

Gravity took hold. The distance between this steeple atop the city's outer wall and the hard ground was about one block—easily enough to reduce any mensch into a smear on the pavement.

But Beatrix had the gift of magic. The sun was slowly setting, and as she fell into the steeple's shadow, her body vanished, like a diver swallowed up by the water. In the next instant, she reappeared in the shadow of a tree outside the walls.

Beatrix didn't know the exact workings of this particular formula. After all, she was a *mage*, not a magus. A good half of her spells she knew by feeling alone, a remarkable talent that she was unable to put into words. Her magic caused the shadows of this world to behave like water, defying all laws of physics to lend

them depth and permeability. Having safely emerged from her shadowy portal, Beatrix checked to make sure nothing had been lost in transit before heading to the rendezvous point.

The problem with this unique method was that if she dropped anything while in the shadow realm, it would be gone for good. For some reason, anything that she had affixed to her person would travel safely through, yet everything else—including other passengers—could not be taken with her. This was something she had proved through practice. She had once attempted to enter the shadows with a rat that she had scrounged up, but her instincts told her: *Enter with this rat and it will die*. She never attempted to directly weaponize her shadows.

All the same, it was an incredible boon to be able to transport just herself to any shadow within her vision. Various checks still made it hard to sneak in and out of towns without being noticed—Beatrix made a habit of wearing the clothes of a noble on vacation to ward off unwanted attention—but it proved astoundingly useful in infiltrating enemy bases.

“B-Bea... Wel’ome ’ack. ’Ow was it?”

“No good. Spineless fools... They retreated to their tents without even crossing a single blade. Well...I suppose that is no surprise when Saint Fidelio is leading the charge. Unfortunately for us, the thaumogram is off-limits.”

The rendezvous point was a short distance away from Marsheim. There, Lepsia was tending to two horses they had stolen from the guard after their retreat from the city. Her injuries from this morning hadn’t had time to heal, so she had been stationed here to look after them.

“Can we re’rieve it?”

“No. The self-deconstruct mechanism should be sufficient. Dammit... This is exactly why I prefer not to resort to such flashy gadgets...”

A number of thaumograms had been installed in other locations aside from the tent grounds, but there was only *one* mana crystal bearing the coordinates for communication. Even if a professional were to disassemble it, it was designed to constantly wipe its mana traces, barring anyone from tracking them. Yet Beatrix’s discontent came from the fact that it wasn’t absolute—it

couldn't *completely* erase its signature.

Beatrix's modus operandi was to never use anything she couldn't perfectly dispose of, even if she were ordered to. She had once been a perfectionist who didn't even allow so much as a single hair to remain at the crime scene. Now she was expected to just *leave behind huge magic tools*? The fact that it took multiple people just to carry them meant they were already a huge liability. Beatrix found it difficult to trust a self-destruct mechanism made to anyone else's specifications.

"Wh-Wha' 'o we 'o?" Lepsia said. "We 'an't co'unica'e with 'em..."

"Yes, and the messengers in the city will be useless before long," Beatrix replied. "We'll have to go with our own two feet. However..."

If she weren't before one of her subordinates, Beatrix would be gnawing at her nails in anxiety right now.

Her client was sloppy, slow to act, and wouldn't listen to any admonishment, but one thing that they *could* do was disappear quickly if the alert was sounded. She had already told them that their bases in Marsheim would be in danger unless they took Goldilock Erich's head, and so it was doubtful that they'd retreated to any bolthole of theirs nearby.

As for her client's client, they were too far to be moved into action. They worked behind the shield of the depth and breadth of their network—the more impenetrable, the better protected they were—but this meant with commands coming from a satellite state, it would take at least a week for information to pass in or out of their system. Worse still, essentially random factors of pure luck and their precise physical position could alter the speed at which the necessary information found its way to them, for better or for worse—if they were absent on other business, Beatrix and company were on their own.

"What would be our optimal next move?" Beatrix said to herself. "Do we focus on bringing the whole organization up to speed, and send people to each location, or should we focus on protecting our most vital assets? Or..."

Beatrix started pacing as she muttered, attempting to organize her thoughts, when she stepped on something unexpected. It was a pair of six-sided dice. There was a leather bag that had fallen near the horses. It must have fallen out

during packing.

“Primanne... Your stress is making you sloppy,” Beatrix muttered, despite the kaggen’s absence. “I may be in charge of cleaning up after the rest of us, but she should really keep an eye on her little trinkets.”

Carved from buffalo bone, the dice had a unique sheen and texture—a personal treasure of Primanne’s. It was said that a miracle imbued in them guaranteed freedom from the strings of fate themselves. No matter what tricks were played, what underhanded measures were put into action, even if the person was protected by an uncanny level of luck, the dice would ignore everything and function fairly. The number they showed was guaranteed to be accurate in this plane of reality.

“I tell her to keep the gambling to a minimum, but to be honest for a moment, I feel like the one making wagers now...”

It went without saying that Primanne owned the set out of a fondness for games of chance. Kaggen held their arms up close to their chests when relaxing. It was a posture that looked like prayer, and in truth they were a race that held fast to their superstitions. Primanne often rolled dice to divine portents of weal or woe with each new job—if the roll was bad, more careful preparations were needed. Beatrix looked at her ally’s fond possession and smiled.

“Odds, and I’ll raise the alarm... Evens...yes, I’ll buy time by heading to the biggest warehouse.”

Beatrix shook the dice in her hand. The quiet clack and rattle soothed her inflamed mind.

Her train of thought touched on the possibility of simply abandoning this accursed job. It was a viable option. Perhaps three options was better anyway. Letting the dice choose between two options felt like a waste of the full range of results; three felt a bit more well-rounded.

This job was as good as over anyway. She had made the optimal choice at each juncture, but in the end the board was still full of hostile pieces closing in, barely winnowed down at all. A coolheaded player would concede here and now before resting while they considered the next game.

But Beatrix's vengeance was not yet complete. If she chose to abandon this job without even achieving the One Cup Clan's goal, then how could she dare face her deceased allies?

Perishing in battle would be far preferable to running away and being pursued. Even if her client was a poor leader, *their* client was particularly crafty. It wouldn't be difficult for them to eliminate five adventurers-turned-assassins who had outlived their purpose. Those who bore inconvenient knowledge were not permitted the luxury of peace or rest. Such were the rules of this world.

"What's wro'g, Bea?"

"It's nothing. Let us hurry on; time is short."

Beatrix readied her left hand to catch the dice as she loosed them from her right. She chuckled quietly. It seemed that her fate wasn't to force a checkmate nor to run away, but to attempt the most optimal plan once again.

[Tips] There are spells and enchantments that allow people to sever themselves from fate in one way or another, whether they permit the user to escape the reach of divine meddlers like the God of Cycles or slip past the bounds of the flow of a place's mana. Yet the world is an ironic place; these methods are handed down by the very divine arbiters of fate Themselves.



Climax

Climax

Once you've come this far, all that's left is to leave the rest to the roll of the dice.

From the realm of myth to the fairground, you just couldn't beat a good shell game if you were looking to get away with something egregious. This wasn't limited to dodgy night stalls, where underhanded play was expected; it was also a hugely viable method in subterfuge.

I had seen many GMs play at our instincts and assumptions, leading us to chase after the obvious threat, the location that seemed fishy, the product that seemed dangerous to anyone and everyone. Hell, I had run that con plenty myself when I was the one behind the screen.

I had been the one egging players on to chase after the suspicious-looking minister in settings where players were fighting to avert a coup; I had sowed the seeds of discord among my players and convinced them to steal an all too precious artifact, mysteriously pristine amid ancient ruins.

Each and every time, my friends had told me that I was *messed up*, but I didn't regret it in the least. It made for a better story.

"Man, I can't believe we turned up at the right place just like that..." I muttered.

Still, when you were the one *actually trying to find the needle in a haystack*, and not merely playing someone who was, it was entirely justifiable to beg the powers that be to maybe show a little mercy. Luckily for us, things were going to plan.

Through my telescope, I caught sight of blackened wheat ears swaying in the wind. The whole field was covered in wheat blight, painting a picture that was far from the Harvest Goddess's usual golden garb. It felt inauspicious. It must

have taken a real rotten heart to force average countryfolk to tend to such a foul-looking crop.

It hadn't yet been harvested because this area was in the north of Ende Erde, where the wind bit a little deeper, a little crueler. The colder weather meant that farmers in this region were only getting to their harvesting now, later than their southern countrymen. The forests surrounding the field functioned as a bit of a windbreak, but I imagined that also served to limit the view. This field must originally have been plowed to create a supply of wheat that could slip under the tax collectors' radar.

Most of the fields we had passed already had been cleanly harvested, so if we had been a mere few days later we would have had to play detective, crawling on the ground to see if any fallen chaff gave the game away.

Schnee had brought in a massive win by narrowing the number of possible locations to *three* just looking at the raw data and documents.

If I had been running this campaign, I would have probably dedicated a good one or two episodes to the diseased wheat hunt, but this campaign was already pretty long-form, so I was glad to have skipped a few steps. We really had our allied spymaster to thank for all our smooth sailing through this adventure path.

One drawback of the table was that choosing the expedited route meant a reduced XP payout. Going straight to the boss in the shortest time possible often led you to biting the dust just as quickly, resulting in a long night drawing up a fresh character sheet.

"They're not showing much care in the harvesting, it seems," I said.

"I suppose that's proof enough that they aren't growing it to be eaten," Margit replied. "You can tell they're being forced into this. This is what it looks like when the peasantry labors strictly for their lord's profits."

The farmers were hacking away at the blackened wheat, but while you usually left the stalk up to a man's shin height—you needed to mulch the soil for the next year if you wanted better gains—these folk were cutting right at the base. That being said, they were growing rye, so it might not have been too huge a problem. Rye was a hardy crop which grew even on poor soil. It was worth remembering that it had only been planted for the ergot on its ears anyway. I

wondered if they had done anything special before planting—whether they'd resorted to magical means, or selective breeding, or treating the soil.

“It looks like they have no plans of drying the wheat either,” Margit continued. “I think it might be fair to say that they truly are only in this for the wheat blight.”

“Yeah, makes sense. You don't need to waste time drying the crop out in the sun if all you want is the fungus growing on it.”

Usually farmers dried their crop immediately after harvesting. Here in the Empire, they bundled up their wheat into sheaves and placed them into stooks to dry. When the moisture had been sufficiently removed and the crop was a beautiful golden color, then it would be time for threshing.

All across the cantons, you could expect to witness the beautiful sight of rows of stooks drying their golden load. Yet today there was no such scene to be found.

Without even participating in the defining image of the season, the wheat was bundled up and loaded into a carriage, which carted it all away when it could carry no more.

Depending on the region, you could even see rings of stooks decorating lowlying hills with decent wind flow. But here the hills were bare. We had done a bit of research before coming and I imagined that on the other side of that knoll lay the river that supplied their factory with water. Even if they were decent farmers, humidity was higher near rivers, so they wouldn't be drying their wheat there anyway.

“The carriage's set off. Let's tail them,” I said. “To be quite honest, I didn't think it'd only take a day to find them.”

“They probably didn't expect us to come out this far,” Margit replied.

We had followed our leads to Rhine's deepest backcountry, even by Ende Erde or the southern periphery's standards. It was a truly remote place; you could see a few houses across the border in the neighboring satellite state from here. This developing canton was so out of the way that I was unsure if its name even appeared on any maps. To top it off, it was ruled by a local lord

magistrate, making it the perfect place to go about your business without the Empire watching over your shoulder.

After a day and a half of rest, I boarded my beloved horse with care for my still-broken arm and set off. We didn't have the time for the luxuries of preparation and backup, and so we'd hurried here with no regard for budget or profit and managed to pull it off in a mere five days. In a usual case, it would have taken two weeks to a month, but this was one of the most important manufacturing bases from Schnee's research.

Unfortunately, she hadn't managed to narrow it down to just the one.

According to our informant, Lady Maxine had given her beloved little brother a good smack—I took it figuratively then, but maybe she was being literal—and managed to rustle up tax management files and logs which detailed the comings and goings of the caravans associated with Kykeon smuggling. What she found was definite proof that Diablo hadn't centralized their production.

It was a smart move. Even if one factory was ratted out, they could play it safe and make sure no one sniffed out the other bases of operation. This would mean that they could continue the production of Kykeon unabated, even if it limited their productive capacity. The same logic applied if a storm or some other unexpected wrinkle rendered one of them inactive.

In the case that an adventurer found one of the factories, it was highly unlikely that they could clean up all the other factories too. Even if they *knew* the locations of the others, the communication delay would buy time for the enemy to flee. This also held true if an army was raised to take them down. It would be no problem at all for them to pack up and leave before the army had even reached the nearest hill. These countermeasures had made Diablo that much more slippery.

Unfortunately for them, they hadn't foreseen that the dream team of Marsheim's top clans would come together to bring a swift end to every last point of production.

"Oh my, what a grand watermill they have," Margit said in awe.

As the two of us sneakily followed the carriage, we were led to a river. It wasn't too big, but it was too wide to leap over and most likely too deep to

forge. Next to it was a rather fancy water wheel, spinning happily.

“The water runs below to power it,” I said. “Looks to be a stream type. Look, they haven’t added any modifications to the flow of water. I bet they chose this method because they wanted to get it up and running quickly. At any rate, it’s not Imperial standard.”

“Yes, now that you mention it, it doesn’t look much like the type from back home at all.”

We had our own waterwheel and adjoining building back in our beautiful home of Konigstuhl. However, unlike this one, ours was an overshot type; a man-made sluice built above it caused the runoff to power it. Such alterations were quite the feat to design and build, but they made rivers even with slow flows capable of producing energy. Thus, these were the most common type found in the Empire.

Powerful waterwheels like the type seen here could thresh the wheat, mill it, and could even irrigate the water. However, that depended on the energy supplied to it: if the river was calm, it wouldn’t provide sufficient power, and so these types of waterwheels had pretty much died out in the Empire.

It was looking pretty likely that whoever built this waterwheel wasn’t of Rhinian birth. Most likely a local lord had outsourced it to someone without Imperial affiliation.

“Erich, look,” Margit said. “A threshing machine.”

“Wow, looks like our folk really have deep pockets. Back in Konigstuhl the village head tried to buy one of those but gave up as it was too expensive. It’s the latest model. Look, it even has a winnowing machine.”

The adjoining building was minimally designed—just a roof over a single room. We could see inside, where the thresher churned away. Powered by the waterwheel’s kinetic energy, the thresher had several pipes for wheat intake; within the device, the wheat grain was sorted from the stems. It was a revolutionary machine that laughed in the face of the past. Only five centuries ago people had to separate the stems manually using flails.

Next to it was the winnower, an L-shaped container that was also powered by

the waterwheel. Once the threshed wheat entered this, a ventilator and sieves would toss the grain to remove the husks and filter out impurities. It was an incredible invention that made what was once a lengthy manual process achievable in mere moments.

Both of these inventions had done wonders for the Empire's agricultural output while simultaneously taking on much of the load of farm laborers. They were revolutionizing the landscape, allowing more and more Rhinians to devote their time and energies to other fields. The stories said they were originally drawn up by the Emperor of Creation, who wished to liberate his soldiers from the responsibilities of serfdom.

The fact that we were seeing the most recent results of centuries of work by the smithing union—aiming for ever more efficiency, ever smaller designs—told me that there were at least a few Imperial nobles hiding in the shadow of this whole affair.

As I mentioned before, this whole assembly used the latest technology. It was so vastly expensive that the village head back in Konigstuhl had abandoned all hope of affording one. The communal waterwheel back home had been bought over sixty years ago, and I remember the blacksmith saying that it was reaching its limits, urging the village head to buy a new one.

That was how *weird* it was for such an incredibly valuable piece of kit to be out here in the middle of nowhere.

In monetary terms, it would set you back thirty drachmae just to buy one of these puppies, never mind the labor costs required to get it up and running. Only magistrates or village heads that valued profit, as opposed to improving their farmers' quality of life, would invest in one of them. This canton hadn't even finished developing—this should have been far lower on their list of priorities.

I knew in my head that the enemy was rich, but this was a bit of a surprise. I knew that there were heaps of people who stood to make a quick profit from internal issues in the Empire, but just how big was Diablo?

“Aha... And we've caught them at a good time. They're shipping off the threshed stuff. Margit, would you mind tracking them?”

“Why of course. You know how to get in touch if anything happens.”

My beautiful scout jangled one of the earrings of the pair we had split. It was equipped with an arachne thread, so fine that it was impossible to see, to allow us to communicate over long distances without so much as a drop of mana being detected.

“I’ll go report back to the others. You let me know when you find their base. I think we’ll be moving in pretty much as soon as you do. Take care out there.”

“Of course I shall. None will step in your shadow, I promise you that.”

Margit vanished as if dissipating into thin air, and soon I couldn’t even sense her presence anymore. I could practically see the manga sound effects illustrating her finely honed ability to fade from sight. She’d probably gotten so good at masking her presence thanks to all of the hard undercover work we’d gone through during this whole long slog.

I knew the workings of her seemingly instantaneous ability to vanish. She led me to focus my attention on something else, just for a moment, and used that opportunity to slip into my blind spot before hurrying away. It was an incredible technique, bordering on teleportation. I honestly couldn’t believe someone could do that purely with their own physical prowess.

It would soon be time for me to play *my* part. I’d put aside acquiring Absolute Charisma for just a bit longer, spending some of my experience on more martial assets instead.

Having left scouting ahead to our expert, I headed to our makeshift camp a little ways off from the road. We had set up base in an old graveyard. It was a desolate bit of land. The graves and crypt had been so worn down by the elements that it was impossible to parse their original shapes. No one had set foot here in a long time. This land probably belonged to a local lord from long ago, as opposed to anyone from the developing canton.

It was all well and good assuming that no one would cross paths with us out here, but did *she* really have to be puffing out smoke with all the ease in the world?

“Oh... Welcome back... And...?”

Our camp didn't have any people-warding barriers. We'd made do with some simple camouflage. In the corner of the graveyard was a huddle of a few dozen adventurers; around half were from the Fellowship, with the rest being true-blue Baldur Clan folk.

Naturally their leader had come along. Clad in an obsidian-black cloak adorned with numerous fetishes, I could tell that she was primed for a fight. When we had found out that this was the biggest factory of the three and most likely where Kykeon's inventor had set up shop, she had said that she would be going no matter what.

Similarly to the raid in Marsheim, Clan Laurentius, the Heilbronn Familie, the saint's party, and some adventurers under Lady Maxine's thumb had been organized into squads and dispatched to the other factories. If things were all going to schedule, then they would all probably have just about finished up. We had gone the farthest today, and so would be cleaning up shop a few beats behind the rest. The other factories had been a lot closer to Marsheim, but everyone else had been put on standby while we made our journey out here—it had been decided that we should all commence the attack on the same day to make sure we secured a win against Diablo.

“We found where they were growing the diseased wheat. We saw them harvesting it, but it didn't seem like they were particularly pressed to finish the job quickly. They were threshing the wheat with a similar laxness,” I said.

“It took a day and a half to rat them out and another five to bring our forces here... I find it strange that they've heard nothing of the raids in Marsheim...no?”

“Agreed. However, I can say that I didn't see them acting like they were trying to cover their tracks. Just yet, at least.”

“Are they confident, or just stupid? No matter... I don't mind...if it means I can have a few words with the fool that churns out their dreck...”

Nanna was usually the picture of sloth, slumped on her sofa and puffing on her hookah languidly, but today her posture and her attitude seemed more put together. Today she wasn't even sucking on her favorite water pipe. She had a rolled cigarette—widely despised in the noble community, as they were

relatively convenient and devoid of any *class*—in a cigarette holder resting between her lips. At any rate, it had improved her mobility.

I didn't know exactly what she was packing, but I imagined that she'd prepared one or two potent enchantments for combat and self-defense. Her water pipe had most likely been designed to project lethal force within the bounds of her manor in the event of an incursion; I was betting the cigarette holder was its equivalent for excursions into the field.

“Oy, Erich! What's the plan for battle prep? We gonna need a day or two to scout stuff out or what?”

While I was lost in thought, Siegfried came out of one of our hidden carriages, which had been covered in a net which camouflaged it among the trees and leaves. He was wearing cloth armor—sufficient in the event of an ambush, and comfortably unthreatening to passersby on the road. It wasn't the wisest move to be wearing your heavy armor on long excursions. With everyone's gear packed away so that we could pretend we were just your average merchant caravan, it would take a little while for everyone to ready up.

“Thing is, I dunno if we got lucky or if our enemy have horrid luck, but we found the field already. Saw them right as they were harvesting,” I replied.

“You serious? Like *just now* just now? Man, they're really draggin' their feet, eh?”

Siegfried was a fellow former farm boy and just as surprised as I was by their harvest delays. There wasn't much point cursing them—it was this slipup that had allowed us to spot them and turn up their base without much effort. I enjoyed putting in the hard work for decent results, but I also didn't like dragging matters out. If fate had saved us some time, then I wasn't going to complain.

“Do they know what it is they're shiftin'?” he asked.

“Didn't look like it,” I replied. “Seemed to me like they were harvesting this stuff with no idea what it was all *for*. They literally threshed it without treating it at all. Wheat blight's caused by a fungus, so it's bad to inhale the particles, but still, they didn't do anything special.”

There were some toxins that were harmless if inhaled, but unfortunately ergot particles still took a toll along those channels. These folks were working in awful conditions. Whoever was pulling the strings evidently didn't care if their labor force got sick further down the line.

"Oh yeah," I said. "They had a pretty nice waterwheel. And the latest threshing and winnowing machines."

"They did? Man, these crooks're makin' me jealous. We had a waterwheel and some machinery, yeah, but they barred any tenant farmers from even *touchin'* them."

"Mm-hmm, we had a winnowing machine too. It was an old thing—not really that efficient. Even with two sieves, a lot of chaff got mixed in. We had a lot of folk just ignoring it, sieving their wheat by hand to get better stuff."

"Hm? Boss, Big Bro, you both had waterwheels in your cantons? Lucky you..."

Etan was at work fixing up the camouflage on the carriage, but as soon as he heard us talking about our old rural lives, he joined in. Most of our Fellows were ex-farmers and before long a discussion tinged with bitterness started about who was and wasn't allowed to use the local waterwheel, if they were even lucky to have one.

In most cases, independent farmers provided the funds to build waterwheels in their cantons, and so they were blessed with the privileges of using it. Tenant farmers and serfs didn't have such luxuries on their land. Most of our Fellows were airing their complaints.

"Those Diablo bastards... Usin' somethin' so precious and so useful to make drugs? Makes me sick," Etan said.

"You said it," Martyn added. "My family weren't allowed to use our waterwheel. There were times I spent the whole day using a flail to thresh the grain... Makes my arm hurt just thinking about it."

Hearing my Fellows air their complaints from yesteryear, I realized that I had been pretty fortunate. We had our own family scythe for harvesting work, and the canton had our own waterwheel, even if it was a bit worn out. Even if care was needed from start to finish, on a physical level, it required far less effort

than what everyone else was describing. Not only that, an ancestor of ours had bought a millstone long ago, which was now just collecting dust in storage. We weren't particularly wealthy, but I realized we didn't have it all bad.

Wow, I thought, to think that a waterwheel can change one's life this much.

"I hate to interrupt your musings on farmwork...but were they milling the wheat...?" Nanna asked.

"Huh? Oh, no, they weren't. They didn't have a mill."

Now that she said it, I was surprised that they hadn't hooked up a mill directly to the waterwheel. It too was a splendid feat of engineering. Millstones took a lot of man power to turn, so it would have made sense for them to have used the waterwheel for that too. Not only that, they didn't even have a stamp mill—a simpler but slower piece of kit. All they could do in that building was thresh the grain.

Of course, waterwheels couldn't power every machine you hooked up to it ad infinitum, so it wasn't all too strange to not have every piece of necessary equipment. It made sense for the most time-consuming part, the threshing, to be done by machine, leaving sorting to be done by hand and the milling to the livestock.

A steady breeze blew in. It was possible that they ground the wheat in a windmill elsewhere. Who knew? It wouldn't have been too odd for them to have divvied up the machinery across individual buildings and power sources to make the waterwheel perform at maximum efficiency.

"Is that right..." Nanna replied. "Then I would imagine they're either doing that at quite the distance or extremely nearby..."

"Is milling such an important process?" I said.

"It irks me to say this...but even though I know the composite ingredients, I do not know what processes they use to make it... But if they grind it into flour, then it'll go bad more quickly, won't it?"

I got what she was hinting at. Grains and beans started to go off much more quickly once they'd been powdered, so it was a common practice to leave the milling until the latest possible stage in order to preserve as much of your crop

as you could. This world didn't have vacuum packaging or oxygen absorbers to keep food fresh, after all. Milling something meant it would be used imminently—otherwise the bugs or bacteria would get to it first.

Taking this into consideration, the two possible conclusions that could be drawn were that they didn't *need* to mill it to make Kykeon, or if it did need to be milled, then the wheat needed to be transported quite the distance first.

This lot were producing something that wasn't illegal quite yet, but would be labeled contraband on the horizon. It made sense for them to want to store it at a safe distance from where it was being grown.

“No amount of intel will give the answers we seek... A normal person wouldn't usually think to be so careful...but that doesn't rule out the possibility that they may hit upon a perfect countermeasure... In some cases at least...”

With extra emphasis on her last few words, Nanna let out a plume of smoke.

I merely hoped for our own sakes that our enemy wasn't quite that careful.

As I was lost in thought, I heard a little tap come from my earring. We had decided on a little code to verify if it was safe to engage in communication. The person calling would tap once and the receiver would tap back twice to indicate it was safe to talk. It took a *lot* of tweaking to make sure the sudden sound out of the blue wouldn't break my concentration during a battle.

“Eszett, do you copy?” came Margit's voice.

“Loud and clear. You're closer than I would've thought, Ida,” I spoke.

The Voice Transfer formula cast Margit's voice into my ear with no trace of noise. I'd walked back here with careful steps to make sure I didn't accidentally break our literal thread of communication, but by the quality of her voice and the requisite mana, it seemed like she wasn't too far.

“You're *still* doin' that fake name stuff?” my comrade said.

“As long as we're out on a job and using this tool to communicate, then yeah. You never know who might be listening in.”

Siegfried's disgusted expression was owed entirely to his own inability to remember his codename. Margit and I had raked him over the coals enough

times that it seemed the whole undercover thing brought with it some minor trauma.

I wasn't wrong, though. Wherever you might go and whatever you might say, your name was valuable intel. Even the smallest scraps of conversation could be leveraged to derail one's plans, and so I wanted him and everyone involved to take the proper care. I wouldn't deny that it made me feel like a super cool tier one operator, but I had practical reasons too. You feel me?

"So try and get used to it," I went on. "What's your codename for today?"

"Uhh... Umm... I'm...Martha? Right?" Sieg said.

"Bingo. Right, sorry for the hold up, Ida."

"No worries, Eszett," Margit replied. "Could you return to our client?"

Our "client" was referring to Nanna. I didn't want her carpooling in on our communication, so we treated her as a third party. No codename, just the "client."

I headed over to her, and Margit asked me to open the map she had made with our camp as its central point.

"If we set your location as zero, then I'm at a point 314 degrees north, just under ten miles out. I've spotted a building near a riverbank that I expect is their final destination."

"Ten miles? That's quite the distance," I said.

"There was decent tree cover, so I was able to head in a relatively straight line, but the carriage was going at quite the clip. I was worried I would lose sight of them."

Margit said that, but she didn't sound out of breath. I should never have expected any less of her. She had probably hidden her presence even as she leaped from branch to branch to stay on their trail.

"However, I cannot approach any closer," she said.

"You can't? Are they well guarded?"

"Not with actual guards. They've got a ward up. I have a bad feeling."

Margit's "bad feeling" wasn't just her gut talking—her five senses were processing everything around her, and although she didn't know what exactly was wrong, she had a visceral intuition that something was off. It was safe to assume that there was someone using nonmagical means to survey a wide area. In other words, we'd found our mark. If we were lucky, then I could initiate some payback for my left arm.

"Roger that. Don't do anything unnecessary, got it?"

As I scribbled on the map with the aid of a compass, I worked out the general location of the building Margit had found. I compared our drawing with the map we'd been provided before the mission. The destination was roughly sixteen kilometers away, or twenty if we followed a local road not displayed on the map.

The factory must have been at a different river from the one that supplied power to the waterwheel. I surmised that it would most likely be a river that had a strong flow but variable depth, rendering it unfit for a waterwheel. Looking at the location, it seemed to fit their requirements.

"I have a question for our client," Margit said. "The factory should have a chimney, correct?"

"That's right..." Nanna said after I relayed the message. "There is probably some kind of gaseous waste...so a chimney would be required..."

"Right... They do have a number of short chimneys, but...none of them are emitting any smoke."

Nanna caught herself as she prepared to take a puff of her cigarette. After gnawing on the holder in a distinctly impolite manner, she took a deep drag and held the smoke in. She remained silent for a good time. In the space of twenty of my own breaths, the cigarette smoke roiled in her lungs.

"Um... Eszett? Is something the matter?"

"She's pondering something," I said.

After ten more breaths, Margit was concerned and asked me to get her to hurry up, but I told her we needed to let Nanna finish whatever train of thought she was entertaining.

All the same, she had *some* lung capacity. Not many people could hold smoke in their lungs for this long without coughing. A pipe was one of the best ways of imbibing in a magical concoction, but your average person would probably have fainted from oxygen deprivation by now.

Just as I made a mental note to tap her on the shoulder if she didn't move in the next ten breaths, Nanna finally let out a long, long puff of smoke.

"Is there...a foul smell?" she said.

"Um, it smells normal to me," Margit replied. "Of trees and earth. Maybe they're storing some manure somewhere around here—there's a faint fecal odor. And the usual human smells on top of that."

"Is that right?" Nanna said. "That's good... Let's prepare for our incursion..."

I was glad she had reached a conclusion after all that thinking, but I was a bit antsy for her to bring the rest of us up to speed.

"You see," Nanna went on, "chimneys that don't emit any smoke are most likely filtration devices... A plume of smoke would stand out too much, wouldn't it...? They've employed a suite of formulae to break down their waste so that neither smoke nor particles are expelled from them..."

So that's their little trick. Your average twenty-first century Earthling would probably be up in arms at how unfair it was that you could just *magic up* a zero-emissions factory, especially if they were from somewhere industrially productive enough to have to put up with smog.

The College's own workshops and testing facilities were underground. The Krahenschanze was an incredibly important building, containing various office-related facilities, lecture halls—you name it—and so it was host to a whole network of top-tier purification systems. I had taken the mysterious network of testing facilities created deep underground thanks to the wonders of magic at face value, but now that I paid it a little more thought, subterranean life meant you had to budget around the valuable resource of *air*.

The College's own research facilities housed a number of students who had a few screws loose, and so it was impossible to know what someone might cook up. It made perfect sense that you would need purification tools that would

prevent any accidents from affecting neighboring rooms and causing excess loss of life.

Anyone would be pissed off if some idiot in a neighboring room brewed some toxic gas and caused a series of casualties to students who hadn't learned how to apply permanent protective barriers. It wouldn't just be an issue of responsibility and punishment; it would be a massive hole in the College's safety protocols. Chaos would reign from roof to basement. It was a good thing they were so well prepared. If such an incident did occur, I was sure that the current emperor, a College alumnus in his own right, would give himself a rage-aneurysm.

"If they've got a regular number of guards and nothing appears out of the ordinary, then I imagine they're running per their usual schedule," Nanna said. "They're a greedy lot, aren't they... Trying to maximize their supply without even bothering to hide it or bail out..."

Nanna wasn't sure whether they'd plagiarized their chimney technology or purchased it through illicit means, but *no smoke* was an indication that they were still working according to protocol. According to her predictions, the chimneys could be weaponized. If they wanted, they could pump aerosolized Kykeon out from those chimneys to cover the entire region in a cloud of poison and prevent anyone from approaching. Kykeon didn't just affect humans. In gaseous form, it would affect any carbon-based life-form. It would be particularly harmful to any creature with a complex nervous system.

As long as the birds around Margit chirped and the rodents scuttled around looking for the bounty of autumn, we were still safe.

"We should surround them posthaste... Time is both an ally...and an enemy..." Nanna said.

"Understood," I said. "You heard that right, people? I know we've only just settled in, but there's ass to kick. Get your boots on."

"Yes, Boss!" came the resounding reply.

It was really cool to hear all these voices come together in perfect harmony. My Fellows gave an impassioned howl before readying their equipment and weapons with a joyful vivacity. We were a team, and keeping everyone clad in

matching uniforms looked good and did wonders for morale.

I had made use of a little reward from the manager for today's mission and taken the plunge to invest in matching armor for everyone. Lady Maxine had paid us *everything* up front, amounting to around fifty drachmae for the clan, with the promise that everyone would receive an individual extra drachma as a personal reward for their hard work.

Time wasn't on our side, so it was out of the question to commission a complete set from scratch. Instead I purchased a mass-produced set. All the same, it was leagues better than the motley assemblage of plunder that they had been using until now. I'd traded in everything we'd claimed from felled bandits for some extra wiggle room, and now all twenty Fellows here today had tempered leather armor with steel breastplates. Underneath was light but strong chain mail. Their hands and forearms were protected by high-quality gloves. They had boots and shin protectors fitted with leather straps. Their armor was a cut above your average mercenary's.

Above all, this sense of cohesion would help not only their morale, but also their ability to work together and under me. Here was no finer example of our nature as social creatures. Upon the front of their breastplates was our clan emblem: a wolf with a sword clasped in its jaw. It alone helped toughen the bond of these comrades fighting as part of the same group. It was an age-old human trait to not only sense the strength and reliability of an army under a united cause, but also to feel a sense of pride at being part of it.

"It's finally time to pay these crooks back a little for causing us and our city so much grief," I said. "We're not dealing with regular bandits today. Let's fight the good fight and win this thing with class."

The Baldur Clan were stationed here and a few spots elsewhere, up to their own business. They would be encircling the factory; Nanna would transmit her orders magically for this mission to keep them coordinated. While their number included some subordinate groups, the ones here with us in this camp were twenty of her best, including Uzu. However, from the looks on their faces I could tell that they were somewhat overwhelmed by the sense of cohesion we had.

As they should have. We were a band of battle-ready adventurers, bound by our desire to achieve great feats. We hadn't come together like your regular clan in search of profit and upward mobility. At heart, we were aspirants to the way of life embodied in the heroes we admired.

“First tenet of the Fellowship of the Blade!”

“Ever enjoyable, ever heroic!” came the resounding response immediately after my own cry. The way their voices came together so clearly felt amazing.

“Second tenet!”

“Show your might through your own merit!”

Everyone in the Fellowship shared my ideals on adventuring. These Fellows had endured a brutal selection process and ruthless training, and now not a single coward stood among them. They knew what it meant to put your life on the line for the sake of battle and adventure.

I felt a rush of confidence seeing them like this. No number of disposable mooks could match up to the sense of reassurance I felt from my clan.

“Third tenet!”

“Cast no shame upon your blade!”

Morale was high, my clan was ready, and our preparations were complete. All that was left was to do our best with whatever the roll of the dice threw at us.

Everyone here today had joined with me in enduring the drudgery of this far overlong session. I was ready to reduce the cruel GM of this affair to tears. The God of Cycles and the God of Trials seemed to have Their own hands in this—or had at least found something compelling in this whole affair.

If Margit deemed it too dangerous to even get close, then I was almost certain that our assassin friends were lurking inside.

I wasn't sure of the reasons why Beatrix and her band of assassins had tried to lay waste to Marsheim, or why they'd made two attempts on my life, but one thing I was dead certain about was that *turnabout is fair play*. She was in no position to complain about my commitment to retribution now. I was sure that they had some kind of tragic past pushing them to do this, but it could wait until

I'd received my due. If they wanted me to listen to their backstory and explanations, then we could do that in the diner or ramen place after this was all finished. On the GM's dime, obviously.

I had been on my horse for days with a broken arm that was slowly healing. It had hurt so much I'd vomited on the way. I'd tried to maintain my image and said I just needed a quick toilet break in the bushes, but the shame I'd felt puking my guts out from pain was impossible to put into words.

I would continue to keep an eye on the limits I'd put on myself, but this time there would be *no trick* I wouldn't resort to.

"Very good!" I shouted. "To arms, my Fellows! We'll not keep these villains waiting a moment longer for their just deserts!"

"YEAH!"

With a resounding cheer, we began our march. Our first goal was to encircle our destination and assess the situation from there. The scope of the affair had ballooned by now. There was almost no chance of us sneaking in there and bringing an end to this without a battle befitting the climax of this campaign.

I was no stranger to dirty tricks should the situation call for it, but at heart I was drawn to the orthodox solution, so long as it held up under scrutiny. I enjoyed those moments when a fellow player would say, "Hey, his stats aren't normal," or "Are you *sure* the dice values are correct?" but I never lost sight of the task at hand.

If the enemy saw we'd surrounded them and flew the white flag, then that would be great. But if they held fast, then we would take them in a fair fight and win. We would crush them before they had even a chance to dispose of any incriminating evidence.

We had the skill. We had the means. We had the will.

All right then, it's time to see what the dice have in store for us...

[Tips] There are many clans in Marsheim that try to cultivate a sense of unity by emblazoning their emblem on their clothes or by giving their clan members matching equipment. However, the Fellowship of the Blade is the

first clan in the city to have given each and every member a full set of matching gear.

“Hey! When did a lowly murderer like you get permission to—”

As the assassin strode down the corridor, each heavy-booted footfall reverberating through the room, a man tried to stop her. He was a mensch—judging by his facial features, born west of the Empire. He was clad in light armor; instead of a helmet, he wore a skull-like mask embedded with an antitoxin filter.

He had barred this woman—dressed for battle, looking off-kilter but strangely on point—for a simple reason. He had been ordered not to let anyone without permission pass him. Yet his attempt to stop Beatrix had ended in vain.

“Gwuck...?”

He had tried to bar the assassin’s way with his baton, but in the next moment found himself letting out the sort of squawk that came from a strangled chicken. Before he had even found time to blink, Beatrix had grabbed his throat and pinned him to the wall. If the wall hadn’t been behind him to receive the impact, he might have found his head dislocating from his shoulders from the hold, or if he had been unlucky, found himself with a snapped spine.

“Out of the way,” Beatrix said. “I am in a *foul* mood. I do not have the patience to manage my strength. *Do not test me.*”

A troubling sound issued from beneath the gloved hand that held the mensch aloft. In prior situations resembling this one, she would apply a bit more pressure to the carotid artery to drop her foe into unconsciousness. However, her bubbling rage right now left her unable to gauge her strength properly.

“And I’d appreciate you not calling me ‘murderer’ again, mutt,” she spat.

Beatrix almost considered ending the guard’s life then and there, but decided nothing decent would come of it. She removed her arm. He slid down to the floor, coughing and spluttering. The pressure of her hand must have injured the mensch’s throat, but she paid it no heed and walked past him.

When she reached the big door at the end, she kicked it open. Behind it were

the stairs down into a basement. It was a large room with desks, chairs, and other pieces of equipment. Despite there being enough space for dozens of people, there were only a few down there. One of them was clad in esoteric priestly garments. The rest looked like your typical gaggle of mages.

Once this room housed dozens of workers, but now only this small handful of people remained. It was quite the pitiful sight.

Documents lay scattered on the desks. A pile of papers stood in front of a stove, as if someone had wanted to incinerate them but had run out of time. It was clear that the scene had been all but abandoned in a hurry. The smartest among them had removed every last trace of their presences.

The assassins had arrived here three days ago and had encouraged the ones working here to abandon their posts, claiming that it would at least buy them some time. And so they fled—those crooked devils that concocted Kykeon.

Yet for some reason or other, the least ideal situation was occurring: their client had decided to stay.

“What are you doing?” Beatrix said as she approached the mages. “Have you filled your head with so many curses that there’s no more room to take in what I’m saying? The adventurers will be here before long.”

Despite her protests, she was ignored.

Beatrix’s client had a gaunt, sallow face with a patchy beard, making his demeanor seem even shabbier than it was. The mage paid no attention to Beatrix as he rubbed the end of his quill on his forehead, muttering something incomprehensible. His dark brown hair was greasy, untouched even by a quick Clean spell. His once vibrant red cloak had been so soiled that it was now a reddish-brown. The evidence of his obsession with his research was evident in the concoctions and balled pieces of paper littering his surroundings.

“No... It’s still not enough. It would make sense for the narcotic elements to heighten the psychological effect... But an ecstatic response will interfere with proper neural transmission. If we combine these, all we’ll do is...”

“Are you listening to me, Durante?!” Beatrix shouted.

With no patience left for the mage as he scribbled away in the Orisons,

Beatrix reached her hand out to grab his shoulder and draw him around. But in the instant her fingers made contact, they were repelled. This wasn't a force field or a repellent barrier. This was the violent manifestation of his memories and emotions.

As soon as she had touched him, his psychic contamination broke through Beatrix's own powerful mental barrier and seeped into her brain. The assassin was familiar with scenes of terror, but even she was shocked by the sights contained in the mage's head.

The screams of a woman who had been burned alive in a fire so furious that she was consumed before the loss of breath could take her; the wailing of a young boy whose stomach had been sliced open with enough delicacy not to kill him, but exposing enough for the birds to peck at; the desperate screeching of a young girl who begged for death as a group of men closed in on her.

Beatrix had paid for her life in blood and battle; she couldn't comprehend the contempt for life seemingly for its own sake that radiated off of him. Soon Durante's own tragic wailing could be heard too. His desperate cries begging them to stop, to spare the girls, changed into a pleading for them to take his life instead, before finally descending into a despairing howl, cursing a world that could endure such horrific scenes.

It had only been a moment of contact, no longer than the blink of an eye, but the innumerable visions of hell itself forced the assassin to her knees in exhaustion. Still, she had achieved her aim. The mage turned his skeletal visage toward Beatrix as if she had committed blasphemy.

"You, is it, Muerte Misma...? I hope you have sufficient reason for interrupting my research," Durante said.

"I am not fond of that name," Beatrix replied. "I request you bequeath me another."

Beatrix hadn't told Durante her real name, and so this appellation was one he had decided on for her.

The assassin was a lay mage who threaded her spells based on her own personal methods that she had devised through trial and error. The peculiar magic circles all over her body played a huge part in controlling and

strengthening her magic. The magic circle that acted as the center of this network wasn't the lily of the valley upon her cheek, but a depiction of a skeletal saint upon her back that few had ever seen.

The saint had once belonged to a religious group who believed in a powerful divine being, revered as the singular god of the western reach. They broke off into their own sect, yet the intensity of their belief had led them to be branded as heretical, and soon the saint was martyred. Depicted in saintly garb and holding flowers, this skeletal figure had subsequently become an object of worship for immigrants who begged for salvation from death.

However, to Beatrix it was a depiction of a divine being that permitted retribution. The formula she had embedded within it had been crafted partially thanks to Beatrix's own innate talents and partially through her dabbling in miracle theory. In this land, such experimentation outstripped merely old and arcane notions of faith—this was *heresy*.

"If that is all, then leave me be. I have much thinking to do," Durante said, brushing her aside.

"Leave your thinking for when there's time for it. I've told you three times already, have I not? A group of adventurers will be upon us soon!"

"Adventurers? Ah... Yes, I recall you making a fuss about some such nonsense."

Beatrix's raised voice must have caused the gaunt mage to recall her previous warnings. Durante looked about him. The only people left in the room were a few of the mage's direct disciples and a priest of some pagan religion who had come to concur with him. It was only now that Durante realized that everyone else in the room had already run off.

However, he seemed to pay it no heed. He began playing with his quill in his hand.

"It is no great matter," Durante said. "Even if a thousand or two thousand common people who don't know the true meaning of suffering come here, it shall be of no concern to me."

"That's not the problem here..."

“In the face of my despair, all shall fall to their knees. Just like me.”

Durante had absolute confidence. No matter how large the army that came knocking, none would block his way. Indeed, Durante had no interest in the plotting and scheming that went on around him. He had simply hid away as his investor had told him to while he made his modifications to Elefsina’s Eye. In his own eyes, he had no reason to work in secret.

After all, *any* who would dare stand in his way would collapse under the mighty weight of his despair.

This same despair had driven Durante mad. So much so that he had forgotten the order of things in planetary reality.

If the Empire pooled their efforts together and dispatched a whole force of battle mages from the College, then it wouldn’t matter if he had spells that could cut down armies. They would still deliver him to his end.

“That reminds me... Where are the others? We’re looking rather thin on the ground,” Durante said.

“I gave them the same warning I gave you and they fled. Simple as that,” Beatrix replied.

“Spineless cowards! And you’re saying you merely *watched* them run for the hills, Muerte Misma?!”

Beatrix could say nothing in the face of her client’s complaints—they ran outside of her scope of work. This was a debt made out of necessity, a pact struck in exchange for the information that would let her avenge her dear Albert’s death. To achieve this, those who stood above even Durante had tasked her with his protection and other covert work.

However, their agreement never said that the assassin had to lend a hand to every stage of the mage’s own schemes. In all honesty, staying by his side for this long amounted to a betrayal of Durante’s own backers. She was only still with this man because running away now would mortally wound the pride of the One Cup Clan.

Without that pride, she would have long washed her hands of this entire farce. If she could have turned the job down, then she would never have agreed

to something so unadventurous as a drug war.

Beatrix wondered if a day would come when the One Cup Clan could return to being normal adventurers once more. She clenched her teeth and pushed down the urge to strangle this deranged fool to death on the spot.

“It isn’t possible to force fools who wish to run into working,” Beatrix said. “They have no loyalty. They’re only the workforce you could scrounge together: rabble from satellite states, dogs of the local lords, fools from Seine... Keeping them all reined in is *your* job, Durante.”

“I am merely one man, lost in my own thoughts... It is beyond me to lead such a band of fools.”

This level of honesty was almost refreshing, but it only stoked the fire of her killing urge. However, it seemed like her words had finally gotten through to the mage. After some thought, Durante ordered the few remaining mages under him to burn all the documents.

“Are you quite sure, kindred?” one of them said. “Two years of hard work will go to waste...”

“It matters not. Everything is in here,” Durante replied, tapping his temple. “It is but a small hurdle compared to the mountain of despair I’ve had to climb.”

The flames of lunacy danced in the man’s deep-set eyes. The green blaze of his stare was no mark of blind self-assurance; no, he was telling the truth. He’d had everything written down strictly to make it easier for his fellow mages to read and share information; as Durante said, every last scrap of information was carved into his mind.

Even if he escaped with nothing but the clothes on his back, all he would have lost was a base of operation. Absolute top secret documents were stored in a vault elsewhere and could be tucked under an arm if the situation called for it. In fact, the most important thing was their harvest of wheat blight—something that would take time and effort to collect once more.

“If I have your permission, then I’ll proceed with burning what’s left,” Beatrix said. “I would prefer not to leave even the smallest scrap of evidence.”

“Do as you will,” Durante replied. “Once we’ve processed enough of the

wheat, we can leave this base behind. Barely any time has passed since our distribution channels in Marsheim were laid to waste. Let us put aside this pointless wittering and focus instead on the matter of where—”

“Sisker! Krouble!”

Just as Beatrix was running mental calculations on just how long it would take to burn the documents, the door of the room burst open. The door was already wonky after Beatrix had kicked it earlier, but the kaggen with her unwieldy hands had decided to just knock it down instead of struggling with the doorknob. It came clattering to the ground, finally having reached the end of its life.

“What is it, Primanne?”

“The enemy! Coming in *tik* droves!” the kaggen shouted back.

“What?!”

Beatrix dashed out of the room, knocking the fallen door aside as she went, unable to believe what she had heard. She sped past the guards in the corridor, too fast for them to register, and hurried up the stairs. Once she reached the top, she leaped through a window out onto the roof. There she warped the air around her, creating a Farsight lens. As she scanned the surroundings, she found that Primanne’s report had been exactly right.

She saw adventurers. A formation of over thirty were marching toward the building. They were almost within beckoning distance.

“Ridiculous... How could they ferret us out so quickly?” Beatrix muttered as she looked out at the incoming force.

She realized something. She had been the one who had just called their workforce “rabble.” No matter how much of a perfectionist Beatrix or the rest of the One Cup Clan were, there was no counting out that someone else in this conspiracy would be stupid enough to make a hash of their job.

Consider, for example, the two subordinates of Viscount Besigheim. It was their own folly that had led Beatrix to eliminate them. Just as no amount of work would prevent new weeds from cropping up in between cracks in the pavement, she could shout herself hoarse and people still wouldn’t take her

warnings seriously, not realizing their lives were in danger until it was too late.

Who had found the tiny leak in their operation that had led them here?

As she gnashed her teeth, the image of a snickering bubastisian appeared in her mind. It was her. Who else could it have been? Her experience and finely honed nose for intel was remarkable enough that Beatrix and her allies had tried to dispatch her once already. It must have been her.

“Blasted cat...” Beatrix said. “I should have skinned her when I had the chance!”

The assassin could no longer contain her anger as memories of her past blunder rushed back to her. She stamped her foot, a brick crumbling underneath it.

All the same, she couldn't fault herself completely. It'd been the optimal choice not to kill Schnee at that juncture. If Beatrix had killed the informant, it would have alerted those who weren't in the know. *Schnee had been worth killing? Why?* They would have gathered like flies, and her death would have set off all-out chaos.

To top it off, the roof of the Snowy Silverwolf was not an ideal place to stage a murder. Its owner had, in days past, led the patrol known as the Ardent Vigil. From their base where the arc peninsula joined with the continent, they repelled the incursion of plundering pirates without rest. Even now the Snowy Silverwolf's owner kept an unwavering watch on what went on within his domain.

John had never told Beatrix why he'd decided to start an inn for adventurers in Marsheim despite his lauded background, but she was sure that his skills hadn't dulled much since his time in the far north. That wasn't to say she *couldn't* kill him with her skills. The problem lay in the number of adventurers that had called his inn their home. If his former allies in the Ardent Vigil and all the adventurers that owed him heard that John had been killed, there would doubtless be a reckoning; they would turn Marsheim upside down in search of the killer. Even Beatrix couldn't survive a mob of adventurers cut from genuinely heroic cloth.

It had been far more prudent to refrain from killing Schnee and incurring

John's wrath and all the snowballing problems that would subsequently follow, but this situation was still not ideal. It had been an impossible puzzle to solve, one crafted by the most mean-spirited of children.

"Not good... Not good at all... We should have finished packing up our things far earlier!"

As Beatrix scanned the terrain, she could sense that they were surrounded by a larger number than what she could merely see. She wagered that they numbered around two hundred. The One Cup Clan could still hold their own well enough to make an easy break through the flank of a fighting force of this size—but then there was the matter of who'd been chosen to lead the charge.

Upon their armor was the emblem of a wolf with a sword clamped in its jaws. At their fore was a young man mounted on an unbroken horse, his namesake flowing freely in the autumn wind. *Goldilocks Erich*.

Beatrix didn't know what countermeasures he had taken, but for some reason Kykeon hadn't worked on him. Back in that lot, he had been engulfed in a cloud of the stuff; he should have succumbed to its effects immediately. Yet he had stood proud and unblemished. To top it off, he had taken control of a violent gale—gods knew how!—to lay waste to his surroundings. He was a dangerous specimen, not worth fighting foolishly. Even when they cornered him in impossible circumstances, five-on-one wasn't enough to end him. This one required *absolute caution*.

Of course, then there was Margit the Silent. Beatrix couldn't see her right now, but she was certain the arachne had to be somewhere. Although the huntress wasn't quite on the One Cup Clan's level when it came to covert assassination, she matched them strength for strength when it came to simply remaining unseen. Beatrix's side were in the unfortunate position of being pinned to their base. Where was Margit lurking as she watched them?

There would be no escape. If they tried to make a break for it together they would be countered; if they tried to escape individually not all of them would be guaranteed to survive. The One Cup Clan esteemed vengeance above all else, but in turn, they could never undertake a mission predicated on sacrificing even one of their number.

“Shit... What to do? Running away with our load is impossible. We have...fifty or so mercenaries in the building...”

The whole Kykeon operation only involved the absolute minimum personnel necessary. Covert operatives from a number of clients and undercover agents from the local lords had taken their share before vanishing into thin air already, but for some reason the mercenaries had chosen to remain. Odds were good that they didn't know the depths of the scheme, merely chalking up their position here as yet another dirty job for the local lords.

The iron rule of a mercenary was to only ask what was necessary. It was what set them apart from nosier and more mercurial adventurers.

How well would they serve in battle? Most were experienced and reasonably talented soldiers, but they would fold before a single mighty warrior. Only one of the One Cup Clan would be needed to dispatch them all; it was highly likely that against Goldilocks Erich and Siegfried the Lucky and Hapless, they would crumble. They would fare fine against the pair's lackeys, but no decent leader would turn a blind eye as their subordinates were slaughtered. Once the blade that had killed the Infernal Knight began its rampage, the mercenaries would be nothing but a minor roadblock.

“There's not enough time to burn all the evidence. Do we knock Durante out and escape with him on our shoulders? No... If any subordinates are left, then they'll leak information. We can't *kill* them to lighten our load either, or Durante will turn on us... What to do...”

There wasn't enough time. Even as she scraped through her thoughts, the optimal solution here wouldn't come to her.

“Damn it all...! Albert, this is all your fault! If you were here, we could burn them all and be done with this farce!”

Albert had left the College due to intercadre political strife and begun a new life as an adventurer. Dropout though he might have been, he was a genius at extreme and potent kataskurgy. He could have blown the whole factory from its foundations with a tidy little spell and led the rest of the clan to freedom in the chaos that followed.

“Leader! Bad news!”

Main had come dashing onto the roof; Beatrix was about to tell her ally that she knew what was happening, but she couldn't say anything before she caught the mask that had been thrown her way. It was the same leather mask worn by the mercenaries, designed to prevent poisonous gases from entering the airways.

“That madman has truly lost vah's mind! Please, quickly! Vah says vah will round up all the adventurers in one fell swoop!”

The masks were enchanted to safeguard the wearer against magically altered or mana-bearing gases and particulates, including aerosolized Kykeon, and had been handed out to every worker and soldier in the factory. While any gas that escaped *outside* the factory was purified, the droplets inevitably produced during the synthesis process for Kykeon contained hazardous byproducts that the workforce had to be protected from at all costs.

“What's got you in all of a rush, Main?” Beatrix said. “Primanne's miracle keeps us safe from poisons...”

Seine's Kaggen were monotheistic. There were few believers in their god in this land, and so They might as well have been absent, but their god's miracles still worked. Beatrix's skeletal saint and lily of the valley tattoos rendered her body too toxic in its own right for any external pathogen to pose a threat; as for the rest of the One Cup Clan, Primanne's miracle invocation kept them safe from the dangers of Kykeon.

“Just put vah on!”

“Mmf...!”

As soon as Main forced the mask onto Beatrix, the assassin witnessed great puffs of blue smoke emanating from the chimneys. The brume was thick with mana. Durante's mana signature was palpable.

The madman had synced up his Kykeon producing tools to the filtration system and was using them to emit a deadly cloud of a terrifying gaseous drug.

“Huh? Ah... WAAAAAGH!”

Main had been so focused on getting her leader's mask on that she was too late to put on her own. She was engulfed by the blue smoke and began

screaming, her tremendous arachne body shrinking in terror.

“Stop... Put...put that axe away! Run, Pitaji! Stop! Don’t touch Amma!”

Main’s eyes were wild and unfocused as she screamed for her parents, their names from a language that Beatrix didn’t know. Main’s mind was somewhere miles away. She cared not for her head ornaments or her mask as scratched at her face. All eight legs drew her body close to the ground. This was a far cry from her usual calm and cool demeanor.

“Main!” Beatrix shouted. “Get a hold of yourself! Turn your face to me!”

“Stop it! Don’t touch Main! Oh, Amma! AMMA!”

As the arachne flailed wildly as she called for her mother, she accidentally threw the mask she had brought for herself. For all Beatrix’s enormous strength (even *without* magical assistance), Main’s rampage buffeted her away.

Main had lost control of herself completely. At this rate she would end up severely wounding herself.

“That blasted madman!” Beatrix spat. “Does he not care who gets caught up in this bedlam? I knew he was a lunatic, but this is beyond the pale!”

Beatrix readied herself, took a deep breath, then leaped onto her rampaging ally’s back. She used her legs to hold Main’s arms still and forced her own mask onto the arachne, as if trying to feed a petulant baby.

“Waah... Aghhh...!”

Main spun around, not caring if she destroyed every brick beneath her, and Beatrix held on as best as she could. Beatrix didn’t want Main accidentally ripping the mask free after she had worked so hard to put it on. After a few violent rotations, Main collided with a chimney and finally came to a stop.

Beatrix anchored her right foot to the ground and looped her left around Main’s waist to lock her in place. With her arms keeping Main’s body stable, she would wait until her ally finally calmed down.

“Ngh... It appears I swallowed some smoke myself...” Beatrix muttered.

Beatrix’s attempt to restrain Main hadn’t come without cost. Due to the effort to keep Main’s mighty form still, when they’d collided with the chimney,

Beatrix had accidentally taken a breath. A thick purl of smoke had found its way into her lungs, and from there, her bloodstream and her brain.

Beatrix had only avoided succumbing to the same despair-driven rage fugue thanks to the mithridatism her lily of the valley tattoo induced, the protective qualities of the skeletal saint on her back, and Primanne's miracle. But even with all of these countermeasures, a moment's exposure to the drug had driven a grim vision to the surface of her mind.

"Albert..."

The hallucinations that had appeared before Beatrix hadn't been as awful as the ones that Main had seen, but they had been sufficient to paralyze her. It was as if she'd stepped unwittingly through a door onto one of the worst moments of her life: the sight of her ally's body.

Albert's corpse appeared now as she had found it. After losing him on that previous mission, he had been captured by the enemy. They had tortured the lad to death. Even without thaumochemical assistance, the image of what they had done to his face—stripped down to bare muscle, red and raw and wet, without even the option to shut his eyes—came to her easily.

But this was not the scene she usually remembered. This time she saw two shadowed figures. Two soon turned to three, then six, then twelve, and on and on. They were faces she knew well—other members of the One Cup Clan killed in action. Despite the passing years, she had not forgotten how they'd passed.

Albert was followed by victim after victim, a gruesome recapitulation of her greatest losses. She could never forget them—men, women, humanfolk, demihumans, demonfolk—all former comrades, all avenged.

Beatrix plunged deeper into despair as the vision drew up specters of older and older friends. Finally the faces of her dearest companions, from memories that now only surfaced in dreams, came into her mind's eye. The first allies she had made. Her fellow adventurers that she had grown to love, before that bastard magistrate decided they were naught but disposable monster fodder. There they were, torn up by that drake, so mutilated that she couldn't tell what parts were whose, surrounded by the other three founding members of the One Cup Clan.

They were still young. Time had stopped for them while Beatrix lived on... No, she had been *left behind*.

“I see... So you are all the root of my despair...”

They scowled at Beatrix, all those poor, beloved corpses. Their faces were terribly sad and full of pity for her. As she looked back at them she realized something.

Durante's plan was to open the very gates of hell.

That madman's dream was to share the utter abjection he had seen with each and every living person he could reach.

These visions were part of that mission. This newest concoction of his would dig up each individual's deepest mental scar and smear salt all over the wound. That had to be it. Why else would all her fallen companions come to her like this now, when she had gone to such lengths to appease their spirits? She had never wavered; they had no cause to turn on her. All of this was only a nightmare, fed by the little doubts that plagued her before merciful sleep settled upon her. Beatrix had won vengeance for them all, just as they had wished. Everyone who'd ever harmed them was dead in the ground.

So why were their eyes full of such pity now? They looked at her as one would at someone who might no longer be a friend, as if to ask *have you finished embarrassing yourself? Are you satisfied?*

They were passing anxieties given false strength; nothing more. She had spent so long fulfilling her duty to her comrades. With each score settled there had been yet another to be won. It went on without end, or it seemed like it would for a time. Now she found herself here, and she could not help but feel like a stone kicked downhill, finally coming to rest. That terrible thought came again: perhaps, in each moment when her friends had passed, they had not wished for revenge at all.

No, that's impossible. They had clashed their cups together and made their pact. Whatever happens, whoever the perpetrator, justice would be served. When it had, the avenged would wait in the afterlife with a big smile on their face. That had been their promise!

So what was this vision? A false despair conjured by her own heart's cowardice? Cowardly flights of fancy conjured by the part of her weak enough to still doubt?

"Not enough... This isn't enough to break me," Beatrix murmured.

"L-Leader..." Main said. "M-Main is sorry... Tum can let go now..."

With the voice of her ally coming from below her, Beatrix realized that Main had finally regained her senses.

"Calm again, are you?"

"Yes... Main is fine now. So please, tum can let go. Even if tum won't break...Main might..."

"Oh! Apologies..."

Beatrix noticed she had tensed her arms without realizing it. As her arms came loose around Main, she started coughing. The pressure on her lungs must have been quite intense.

"Only a moment of inhalation caused such a reaction... Quite the potent concoction..."

"Sorry, Leader. How long was Main out for?"

"Only a few moments. Time enough for an enemy to have killed you."

It had taken less than ten seconds for Beatrix to affix the mask on Main. In other words, it had all taken place in the space of four breaths. One breath for the visions to start; two for her to go berserk. Not only that, it lingered in the body. For the average person, four breaths of the vapor could cause three minutes of hallucinations. If you kept breathing it in, you probably would never wake up from the nightmare.

"What did you see?" Beatrix asked.

"Main's hometown was attacked...back when Main lived in the part of the arc peninsula which connects with the continent. Main was but a child, selling nets to fishermen mere kilometers from the Imperial border..."

"Ah, I remember. It was two years ago, yes? I picked you up when you were

only nine...”

Main looked mature, but she had only seen eleven summers. Unlike jumping spider arachne, huntsman arachne aged quickly during their youths; most would assume from her face that she was developmentally identical to a grown mensch woman. The truth was that Main was the youngest of the group and their latest surviving newcomer.

Main had lost everything at the hands of a pirate raid. That had probably been the lowest point of her life.

The One Cup Clan just so happened to have finished a job nearby—they’d had six members at that point—and so saved Main. After a year of training and working together, she claimed her vengeance by slaughtering the foul pirates who had stolen everything from her with her own hands. It had done nothing to expunge the memory or dilute its sting.

Even if Durante hadn’t yet achieved his true ends, his creation had opened a door onto someone’s personal hell.

“To think it’s been two years since you joined us already... Time flows so quickly. No surprise that I’ve aged so much,” Beatrix said.

“Leader, now’s not the time for reminiscing! Please put on Main’s mask! Tum will inhale too much...”

“Pay me no heed. If I use my magic to slow my metabolism, then I can slow its progression. You’ll be on watch, so please use it.”

Beatrix stood at the edge of the roof, her feet shoulder width apart and arms crossed in a powerful stance. She’d been at least partly bluffing. Main’s words had brought her back out from the depths of despair, but her deceased allies still stood behind her now. She could feel their gaze upon her back.

Even with her metabolism pushed to its slowest limits and switching to long, shallow breaths to reduce her air intake, she could feel her grip on reality loosen. Beatrix steeled herself, trying to batter the hallucinations away through the force of her own convictions.

She too had been part of that pact. If the day came when she was felled in battle, then she too wanted someone to avenge her. She would never be

someone else's pawn again.

"We don't have time to be standing around. Look, they appear unharmed."

"H-Huh? Ve are?! Why?!"

It was as Beatrix had said. The adventurers lined up in front of the factory were standing tall. Bandanas wrapped around their faces obscured their expressions, but none of them appeared to be in the same kind of writhing pain that the two assassins had just suffered. There was no means of any kind Beatrix knew of that would offer better protection than her own three-tiered defense, and even *that* fell short.

"Dammit..." Beatrix said. "Too many that I should have killed off!"

It was all thanks to that woman standing at the front of their formation, incense burner in one hand and cigarette holder in the other.

Nanna Baldur Snorrison had countered the smoke with a single defensive spell.



The incense burner hanging from her left hand swayed slowly. With each swing it emitted bubbling technicolor fumes that repelled the factory's azure emissions, dissipating them wherever they clashed. Not only that, her empty cigarette holder sucked in any outlying gas, chemically transforming it into a rainbow brume to be recycled as a weapon against the aerosolized despair.

Nanna's smoke had spread far and wide, surrounding the factory to lock the foul blue mist inside. Durante's smoke tested the boundaries here and there, but anyone could see who held the advantage.

"So even our client loses to the weight of this woman's own swaggering nihilism..."

Even Beatrix could tell that the horrid technicolor stuff surrounding the mage would cause its own unsavory effects if inhaled. The gas masks were designed to protect against Kykeon's unique properties; it looked doubtful that it would protect against the agonies of that prismatic smog.

"We're striking back. Assemble everyone; clearly they're not backing down."

"What should ham do with the client?" Main asked.

"Leave him be. There's nowhere for him to run unless we eliminate the lot. Let him do as he pleases."

In other words, there was no turning back now.

"Hold on... Yes... Even used tea leaves serve a purpose..."

Beatrix glared at Goldilocks, who drew his blade atop his steed. Unlike last time, he had a shield upon his left arm. Despite the damage she'd done to it, his arm seemed perfectly functional.

Silently, he drew Schutzwolfe—already widely sung of—and leveled it squarely at her. At his wordless message announcing his impending march, Beatrix laughed. She raised a thumb and drew it across her neck.

Fine, come if you so wish. The One Cup Clan's own craving for vengeance led them down a path without branches or exits. In the end, what did it matter if they should come to rest in this stinking industrial husk?

[Tips] What makes psychosorcery so profoundly difficult to systematize is the profound variation in each and every soul. They can be classified in broad strokes, but when despair means something different to each individual, creating a single drug that can affect everyone equally is but a dream within a dream.

Here, then, was a perfect example of a great ally to have and an enemy to avoid at all costs rolled up all in one, right before my eyes. I could almost feel a bead of sweat roll down my forehead as I watched her in action.

See, I had mentally prepared myself for the eventuality that our enemies might set the factory alight as they attempted to jump ship, but I didn't think they would hit us with a wave of toxic gas—the very same that they had readied for Marsheim's decline. I even made sure miasma-warding face coverings had been handed out to everyone, but holy moly were they pouring their signature brew on thick.

The mana waves were off the charts. I could tell whatever they were up to, it would be far-reaching. There weren't just simple formulae powering this thing; they must have had arcane furnaces or something mechanical pumping this stuff out.

Arcane furnaces were the byproduct of magia attempting to create a perpetual motion machine of the first kind. They amplified the effects of input mana tenfold—pretty bewilderingly powerful stuff. It helped to think of an arcane furnace a bit like a bicycle: for the same expenditure of muscle power, you cover a lot more distance. Furthermore, an arcane furnace could *break down ordinary matter into mana*. In theory, a mana furnace could turn even a paltry mage into a powerhouse.

I didn't want to downplay things today, as all of these mystic engines were incredible in their own right, but I expected the one inside was like an ant compared to the elephantine one in the aership that passed over my head in Berylin all those years ago. It was forbidden to install one anywhere in the Empire without the College's permission. Naturally there was the occasional scofflaw who'd tinker up one of their own behind closed doors, but Diablo's furnace was a sprawling beast, spilling out of the confines of the factory's walls.

This lot had pulled more than a few strings to get their scheme off the ground, it seemed.

Faced with the death clouds from above, I thanked my most patient inner voices for keeping me from eliminating the Baldur Clan that summer.

“Boring methods for a boring drug... I shouldn’t be too surprised,” Nanna murmured.

Before the first trickle of cold sweat could even slide down my back at the onset of this billowing monstrosity, Nanna stepped forward and cast a few protective spells. Threads of technicolor smoke issued from her incense burner, the same color as that horrid stuff that had covered her mansion on the day she tested my resolve, and it immediately pushed back against the foul blue gas. No, that wasn’t quite right, it was *engulfing* it. If that wasn’t enough, her empty cigarette holder sucked in any excess traces. A few formulae weaved into her holder converted it back into her rainbow cloud, making for the perfect counterattack.

I wanted to give Nanna a round of applause. This wasn’t as easy as she made it look—it required a total understanding of the enemy’s spell to break down and then recompose the smoke. Any miscalculation would result in a game over for all of us. The enemy’s chemical weapon should have activated as soon as it entered our systems, frying our brains. I was amazed that this was the same Nanna; I was so used to seeing her so utterly blasted out of her own mind that she could barely stay upright.

If she hadn’t been here today, and if in that imaginary scenario I chose not to owe Lottie a huge favor, then we would’ve had to wait until this death cloud dissipated as we fought a war of attrition while our enemies stayed cozy in their base. Even if our foes inside couldn’t just constantly churn out the spells that supported their defensive approach, it would be easy for them to buy time to destroy all the evidence and then make their escape under the smoke screen. It was no exaggeration that we had an ally of the highest caliber on our side today.

Whoever coined the phrase “patience is a virtue” knew what was up.

“Despair, despair, despair...” Nanna muttered. “I had almost forgotten the

true meaning of the word...”

Just as I was reaffirming the fact that Lady Leizniz clearly hadn't picked Nanna to be her disciple on looks alone, the mage in question looked back at me.

“It'll be a bit hazy...but you can head on through... Your face coverings...should prevent any lasting effects...”

“I'm glad to hear it,” I said.

“However...our opponent is using an arcane furnace... I won't be able to win a battle of endurance... I imagine I can hold it off for thirty minutes, at least... I leave the rest to you...”

“Roger that.”

All right, let's get this show on the road, then. Thirty minutes in rounds, each taking five seconds apiece, would be a good 360 rounds. Once we got started, it would be over before we knew it. At the table, fractions of seconds of in-game time could stretch into hours at the table as friends deliberated over tactical decisions, rule disambiguations, and conversational tangents.

Still, the task ahead was looking trickier by the minute. Just as I was about to hop off Castor, I felt a pair of eyes on me. *Aha, so you were here after all.*

I fixed my attention on the factory. Beatrix was standing on the roof, clad in her sumptuous dress and holding a distinctly unladylike pose. There were two deadly drugs intermingling into a sea of psychoactive horror beneath her, yet she was standing right next to the chimneys, where her side's fumes would be thickest. I applauded her guts.

I felt like our eyes met in that moment, and so I pointed my sword her way and held up my shield in greeting. What I got in return was a simple announcement that she wanted my neck.

Very nice. Now I'm in the mood. I vastly preferred a knock-down, drag-out one-on-one far more when we both had our hearts in the game to a chase, especially if the other party wasn't into it at all.

I didn't know what chain of events had led her to that roof today, but if she wanted to talk, we could do it after we'd smacked the stuffing out of one

another.

“Everyone, shields high,” I said to the squad heading inside today. “I’ll lead the charge.”

“Yes, Boss!” came the resounding reply.

At my command, my Fellows got into two lines—not a hair out of place—and readied their new round shields into a shield wall. Kaya positioned herself safely behind us, and our lines were filled out by specially selected members of the Baldur Clan who were suited to this kind of frontal assault.

It looked like our foe were finishing up their preparations too, because I noticed windows opening and archers getting into position behind them.

I hope you’re ready to see the results of our daily training—our blood, sweat, and tears.

“All right, people, let’s not rush this,” I said. “Follow me fifteen paces behind.”

“You what?” Siegfried said, shooting a glare at me. “I know a leader should be in front, but you don’t gotta go that far...”

My comrade had an exasperated look on his face, but none of us could forget that our foes had an archer who could fire off massive arrows almost at the speed of sound. I needed to be the target of that aggro, or our Fellows were in for a miserable time.

“Gah... Fine, fine...” he said, finally.

“Oh? You don’t have to join me, Sieg.”

“Hell I don’t. If you go forward and I don’t, then how bad is that gonna make me, huh? I mean, we’ve got Kaya’s arrow-ward potion on, so we’ll be all good.”

Wow, what trust my comrade had in his partner. It was reassuring to have Kaya’s potion, but even I wasn’t sure if it would stop the gargantuan missiles I was expecting would come tearing out of the factory gates. There was nothing so reassuring as having a trustworthy ally by my side going into battle.

“All right, let’s start putting the pressure on the enemy,” I said. “Little by little, got it?”

“We’ve trained so much that we could probably sprint right to the gate without breaking step. D’you really think we should be going so slowly?”

“From the looks of things, they don’t have too many people in there defending their base. We need to play mind games too.”

Their factory didn’t have perimeter walls or an outside gate, so if we marched up to their door slowly and unharmed, especially if we were under heavy arrow fire, then that would work as an implicit indication that their leadership was failing. In situations like this, choosing to go slowly and really rub our strength in the enemy’s face would prevent them from charging out at us in a crazed assault. It was a bit of an unintuitive move, but also made it easier for us.

“Ida, can you hear me? We’re about to move in,” I said to my earring.

“I’ve got eyes on you, Eszett,” came Margit’s reply. “A pity. If I had been in a better position, I could have shot her down.”

Margit was nearby, ready to join us as soon as she needed to. She had a point, but I felt that Beatrix wouldn’t have placed herself up there without good reason. It wasn’t important at this moment in time, and we could start asking questions once we settled this thing.

“MARCH!”

As we set off, I started to whistle the tune of the British Grenadiers, giving off the biggest impression that I could that this was an easy-breezy mission for us. We might not have had any red on our uniforms, but the tune just felt so emblematic of an elite vanguard. So much so that I was happy to accept any criticism that maybe the northern isles were a more fitting calque for the tune than us Rhinian folk.

I wasn’t doing it just for the fun of it, though. A force of twenty was small enough to simply shout to lead them, but my voice wasn’t deep or booming; it would get lost should the battle begin. I thought that it might be fun to get a little drum and fife unit going if we got any bigger. If we had that kind of triumphant sound following us while we gallantly marched forward, I doubted that anyone would mock us as filthy and rootless vagabonds.

“Ooh... They’re getting pretty close this time,” I said.

“Even when you know they’re not gonna hit with the potion, it...”

“...Still is kinda scary, huh?”

Sieg looked like he was having trouble finishing his train of thought, so I did it for him. Kaya’s potion was concocted of materials that arrows fundamentally hated, and so it wouldn’t force near misses to greatly change their trajectory, but it was still a little scary having the arrows fly just past your ear. All in all, getting hit was still *worse*, and at that distance you could bat them out of the air with a weapon, but even if you knew so on paper, it was hard to trust the process.

“They didn’t skimp on hiring good archers. We’re a good hundred paces away, but these would hit us in normal circumstances.”

“Don’t ya think they’re usin’ magic or— WHOA!”

Whew, I thought. that arrow flew right between Siegfried’s legs. It had found its way through his step at just the right moment, without even grazing his thighs or his first-ever sword. Talk about lucky. This was exactly what I meant when I said the near misses were still enough to make you jump.

“That...was close...”

I decided to ignore his muttering that he almost pissed his pants. After all, I think if I’d been the recipient of that close shave, I would’ve felt the strength leave my gut too.

“I’m impressed,” I said. “You really are made of the right stuff.”

“Shut it, man!”

If the front line pressed on with confidence, then those behind us could march with confidence too—I was happy keeping up this rhythm. The job of a leader also included keeping one’s subordinates’ guts in check.

There were few archers despite the size of the factory, but now that we were only fifty paces away it wouldn’t be surprising for their arrows to start finding their marks. It was quite amusing to watch the arrows spin off in utterly unscientific directions, but I thought about the possible alternative without Kaya where we would have had to hurry through this with only our shields to

protect us.

It was a whole different kind of relief to have a party of folk who you could really trust. What would make this scene perfect would be a mage who focused on casting instant heals and a priest specialized in providing support buffs.

As we got ever closer, bidding them to take us on whenever they wanted with each step closer, the giant arrows from the vierman never came. They must have been stocking them up for an ambush. Or they were just that valuable. If they weren't going to stop us during our march, then all we needed to do was to prepare for the inevitable indoor skirmish.

"I come with one final warning! If you surrender now, we won't take your lives! We will treat you with the respect you deserve. This is your final chance!"

I gave my formal ultimatum, for good form's sake. The attacks did let up—but only momentarily. I imagined that even if most of these guards didn't want to fight to the death, there were probably a lot of them who didn't want to be captured under any circumstances.

"Very good," I said to my Fellows. "We move as planned—time to break in. Cut down any who try to flee or fight back as if they were but cattle."

It was more effort to do things this way, but them's the breaks. I knew they wanted to wear us down as much as they could before the boss battle, and we didn't have much choice.

The gate was locked. As I readied myself to cut it down, I felt a shiver run down my spine.

"DOWN!"

I swung my sword before I could even think and felt the thrumming shock as Schutzwolfe collided with the mighty arrow that came barreling from down the hall. To think they would get a "cannon" ready, facing the door from the opposite end of the hallway to ambush us at our biggest opening! I knew these missiles were tough, but not enough to smash down the gates.

"Holy crap, I thought I was gonna die!" my comrade said.

The gates were made up of two doors, and they had blown open in the

moment after the giant arrow came through. I'd been on the right side and reacted quickly enough to knock it out of the way, so I was fine. However, the left door came crashing down, and bounced off the ground once, before knocking into Sieg's shield and coming to a halt.

Of course, the potion only worked on *arrows*, not everything that came speeding your way.

That was close. If the dice had rolled poorly for Siegfried, he would've had to retire from this campaign. The gates were thick and reinforced with iron. If it hadn't had the ground to slow it down, then its mighty weight would have sent even the toughest Fellow flying.

"Ngh... My arm's stinging..." I said. "You okay back there?"

"Something *bad* flew right over my head..."

"I-Is my head still attached?! I'm alive, aren't I?!"

A split-second decision had led me to cut upward through the arrow, and it seemed like I had broken the head off safely. None of our Fellows were harmed, but it looked like it had just about grazed our two tallest members, Etan and Mathieu, who looked understandably dazed. The arrow had so much kinetic energy that even cutting it down had caused a booming sound. It was no surprise that they might have thought death had finally come for them.

"All right, seems we're all okay," I said. "The enemy's smart. Keep your wits about you as we enter."

"'Seems we're all okay'?! You just brush it off like that?! You're mad!"

My comrade was shouting at me, but I wasn't wrong—no one was dead or even injured. I had been momentarily worried about my recently healed left arm, but with the hallway empty—the vierman must have run off after the shot—we were in the clear for now.

"We'll take charge of this floor. Fellows, I want you upstairs. The rest of you, your objective is to clear the basement. Don't forget to use your potions before moving in, okay? The Merciful Sapling herself prepared a lot, so don't be stingy."

Nanna had given me free rein over the Baldur Clan members joining us today and so I gladly gave them the floor that I imagined would be less interesting. I didn't want poor communication being the thing that tripped us up so I tasked my Fellows with the upper floor—where I expected the mercenaries to be—and the Baldur Clan with downstairs.

The core members—me, Siegfried, Margit, and Kaya—would take on the workshop on the first floor which I imagined to be the most important part of the operation. However, I knew that we were dealing with professionals who worked in the shadows and so I asked Etan to act as Kaya's bodyguard—I knew my Fellows would be fine on their mission without him. He was wielding a mighty shield that a regular mensch couldn't lift—of the ilk known as a “tower shield”—and I was sure that his equally mighty frame and honed skills would be able to protect our more fragile backliner.

Margit was on a mission to lay the pressure thick on our foes so I wasn't actually sure where she was at this moment. However, I had complete and utter certainty that she would leap into action as soon as the enemy showed even a drop of their killing intent. Our formation with our deadly scout in the shadows would make us a lot more of a pain for the enemy to deal with. I was more than happy to use mind tricks to keep them on their toes.

“Move out!”

After my call, everyone moved into action. Before long the shouts of battle and the crashing sounds of potion bottles being launched filled the building. Everyone was liberally using Kaya's flash-bang potions and so I was sure that the sounds of the enemy forces would fade out before long. I had a little look at the formulae too and reworked it to not only increase the radius but also prevent it from blinding us, but that was nothing compared to what Kaya had done, the professional she was.

Our resident herbalist had made sure that they wouldn't affect their user, even if they weren't a mage, and made them utterly convenient to use by managing to get the concoction safely into simple earthen jars. Not only that, she had devised a special prototype too. The flash-bang potions only worked once you shattered their outer shell and so Kaya had been puzzling on whether they could explode after a set amount of time or with other methods that didn't

require smashing them. I had been playing around with these things mostly going by instinct, but her work was truly something else.

If all things went smoothly then our Fellows shouldn't be harmed much if at all.

That was if *those* five didn't show up, that was.

Beatrix had shown herself pretty openly and we had received a nice "welcome" coming through the door, but apart from that I hadn't seen hide nor hair of them. I had told everyone in the Fellowship to blow the whistle if they encountered anyone they couldn't handle, but the sounds coming from around me were your regular old battle noises. It was looking like they weren't trying to wear us down by chopping off our limbs first.

In which case, they were probably behind *that* door that screamed boss room.

"Watch out, Erich," Kaya said. "The mana signals are strongest from behind that door. I expect the enemy's central point is in that room, not downstairs in the basement." It seemed that she had sensed the same thing that I had.

Even from here, I could tell that the room behind the doors was huge. From the looks of the walls, the second floor had been removed, giving the room a lot of vertical space. The conclusion that could be drawn from that was that this was most likely the production room. The layout screamed final fight before reaching the mastermind. If they *weren't* in there, then I would yell at the GM for being so contrarian.

"Right, let's introduce ourselves, shall we?"

I gripped my sword, making sure that my arm wasn't twinging anymore, and got Etan and Kaya to fall back a bit. Siegfried looked ready to go. He had his spear in a low position, almost scraping the floor, clear to charge at any moment.

The most dangerous moment of an indoor battle is opening a door. Just as demonstrated earlier, it was the perfect moment to launch a surprise attack on your enemy while they were busy opening it. I gathered my energy, ready to cut down the heavy door before me. I took the familiar position, glad to have a

stationary target I could unleash Schism on.

I breathed in.

Cutting through steel wasn't as easy as it looked. You either needed to choose a weapon that ranked higher on the toughness scale or you needed to strike perfectly at the thinnest and weakest part of your target. Fortunately for me, if I activated Schism then I wouldn't even risk chipping my blade.

After my inhalation, I readied Schutzwolfe to slice...and instead let out a violent killing intent.

The problem with Schism was that any reactions following the swing would be delayed. If another mighty arrow came rocketing through, then it would hit me square on. I wasn't as exhausted as our time in the cursed cedar maze, so I wouldn't have as long to wait before I could pop off again, but I still wouldn't be able to counterattack as I usually could.

The assassins behind this door were veterans who could kill me the instant I dropped my guard. I needed to be more careful than usual, and so I controlled myself and merely let my aura be known instead of striking. However, there was no response.

Hmm? Did the vierman not have the confidence to fire through steel doors this thick? As these thoughts ran through my head, I finally unleashed my swing—a whole breath later—and cut through in a beautiful arc.

This feat that seemed more appropriate to the katana-wielding friend of a certain gentleman thief was a piece of cake when you combined Divine skills with Schism. If childhood me, the kid who dreamed of being a swordsman, could see me now, I'm sure he would be overjoyed that his choice in life hadn't been misplaced.

My comrade gave me quite the surprised expression while I admired my handiwork, for some reason.

"Y'know, Erich," Siegfried said, "you're gettin' further from *human* every time I look at ya..."

"Huh? You think? This is nothing compared to slicing through dragon scales, I bet. If you dream of achieving that one day, then I don't think you should call

this inhuman...”

Come on, Sieg, I thought, you said you wanted to achieve the same feats as your namesake! If your dream is to find the fabled Windslaught, lost since the Age of Gods, then you can't waste your energy being surprised at a little door slicing.

I was positively *normal* compared to that monster who could create a micro black hole with the snap of her fingers, that perverted wraith who could freeze space or even reality itself with one dirty look, or the saint who could cloak his spear in such intense enchanted flame that it *ionized*.

There was no shortage of ambitious young heroes in the fiction of my previous life whose pursuit of superhuman power set them up for a tragic downfall. We needed to be a bit smarter about how we would eventually become great heroes.

“Hmm... No response...”

With no way of supporting itself, the door fell backward into the room with a belly-shaking boom, but there was no movement inside. However, a gap in the blue smoke snaking around our ankles revealed a few corpses. They must have had runners. Unlike some of the mercenaries I'd seen, these victims didn't have gas masks. Unlike Nanna's concoction, their chemical weapon didn't distinguish between friend and foe, it seemed. Judging from their clothes, it looked like these poor souls weren't fighters, but local citizens who'd been drafted without ever really getting a clear picture of what they were doing.

Upon closer inspection, it looked like they hadn't died from asphyxiation. One of them had been strangled with his own leather belt, and the other two had holes in their throats. Had they committed suicide *before* their brains or organs shut down from the drug? I knew that this mysterious new mist was dangerous, but this was a clear sign that we needed to hurry. As soon as Nanna's energy was spent, we could end up in a similarly pitiful situation.

“They didn't take the bait, huh...” I said.

“They're pros,” Siegfried replied. “They ain't gonna give up their advantage.”

“Yeah, they'd win the endurance game any day of the week, that's for sure.

Fine, let's head in."

I had the small hope that with a broken door, they would realize they had less chance of an ambush and would bum-rush us, but waiting here would only be a waste of time. Assassins had patience in spades; it was time to enter the lion's den.

As I was about to lead the charge, I felt Siegfried's hand grab my shoulder. Judging by the look on his face and his raised fist, it looked like he wasn't happy with me going first again. It had been a lesson of mine in the Fellowship that going in first was the most dangerous job, but also the one that brought the most glory. My comrade really did have his sights set on pulling in the big reputation points, huh.

"Schere, stein, papier!" we both yelled in unison.

It was a funny thing that no matter where you went—this world or my last—rock, paper, scissors was pretty much the same, despite the difference in nomenclature. With the same energy as a Japanese schoolkid trying to get the last carton of milk at lunchtime, we battled. I unleashed scissors, but Siegfried revealed rock.

I tutted loudly as Sieg pumped his fist in celebration.

Stupid game... I had leaned over slightly to conceal my hand right until the last moment, but it was just luck at the end of the day. Back in Konigstuhl I lost four times out of five when me and my brothers did this to decide who would take on what chore. It looked like no amount of practice could fix bad luck.

"All right, in we go," my comrade said.

Siegfried readied himself by the broken door, and with no care for waste, tossed in three flash-bang potions. Each was thrown to cover as much of the room as possible. As they exploded with sound and light, we stepped into the room.

I was surprised by the size of the room. I would wager that it was about as big as a gymnasium—not the kind you'd find in schools, but the public sort that could easily fit three basketball courts.

Lined up inside were three metal storage tanks. They were huge—I doubted

that ten people holding hands would be enough to encircle one—and reminded me of the vats you saw in industrial breweries back in my old world. Pipes connected the containers to strange machines on the wall. They all groaned under an arcane strain.

“S-Stand back, fools!”

Right at the back of the room was a complicated machine that looked more like a pipe organ than anything. A filthy mage stood in front of it as he howled at us, a tube hooking his neck right into the machine. This must have been the arcane furnace. Its beautiful appearance stood in stark contrast to the foul magic that it was churning out.

The blue smoke outside was pumping out at an incredible rate; it must have taken an unceasing stream of mana to fuel and unwavering supervision of the controls to sustain. From his panicked tapping away, it looked like that if he didn't keep the machine working at this pace, then the effects wouldn't match up to his wishes, or it would simply shut down.

Magic and computer programming had some marked similarities, but one of the distinct drawbacks of magic by comparison was the profound difficulty of keeping a process automated. Even “permanent” spells conjured by magia had to be constantly woven, their effects and targets calculated beforehand to ensure they stayed active. It wasn't as easy as pushing the big red button to set a constantly billowing cloud of death over a huge area.

“Kill him and it'll all be over, huh,” Siegfried said.

“At least the smoke will be,” I said. “But, man, he looks like a *shrimp* if you ask me.”

“Uh, he looks like a mensch to me...”

I froze. I'd totally used a Japanese expression, not a Rhinian one.

“Ah, yeah, it's a phrase in fishing communities,” I bluffed. “It essentially means, if you manage to catch a huge sea bream with a cheap shrimp, then you've turned dirt into gold, essentially.”

Here in Rhine you would probably say “Using wurst to buy speck,” or something of the like. Fortunately it seemed that my comrade bought my on-

the-spot thinking.

“I get ya,” Sieg said. “So he’s the *bait*, eh?”

From what I had heard about arcane furnaces, they were finicky creatures with the temperaments of toddlers; if you gave them too little care they’d churn out disasters left and right, but they’d shriek and howl and utterly shut down if you overhandled them. This mage was operating this huge machine all on his lonesome, creating what had to be Great Work-level stuff out there—and yet he was so *obviously* just here to bait us out. The guy’s dance card was *full*. If he had any bandwidth left, then I doubted he would just be shouting curses at us.

“Why?! Why doesn’t it work?!” he went on. “Why don’t you fall to your knees in despair?!”

“What’s he yappin’ on about?” Siegfried asked.

“Who knows,” I said. “I guess he was pretty damn confident in the power of his formulae.”

From his moaning about despair and from the way those folk had met their end, whatever foul gas he had cooked up this time must have had some kind of psychosorcerous effect. Still, if Nanna could whip up a countermeasure without even needing her own arcane furnace, it couldn’t be all that incredible. I had led a rather peaceful and unassuming life back on Earth, but even I had experienced a few moments where the black dog reared its head and my thoughts drifted to authoring my own ending before biology and plain statistics had their way with me. Compared to the times I’d had, Nanna was on a whole other level of abjection; that gal had long since lost the power to imagine a future that didn’t come with a neat and well-planned cessation of self at the end.

At any rate, I could think of two reasons why this guy was alive, or more accurately, *still kicking*.

The first was that Beatrix’s party wanted to use his smoke as cover. The assassins were the lizard; he was its tail. Such things were known to twitch about after autotomizing, occupying the predator’s attention perfectly. His very obvious presence here suited that logic well.

The second was that, like I said to Siegfried, he was a tail with a very obvious, very dangerous *sting* at the end.

Whether we captured or killed this mage, we still had to neutralize him. I wasn't sure on our exact time, but I imagined we had probably spent around fifteen minutes getting here. The clock was ticking. We needed to get this thing in the can swiftly and effectively.

Call it an adventurer's hunch, but I was almost certain that he was playing the latter role. Things were perfectly set up for their counterattack as soon as we moved in. I could practically see their piece held in the air, ready to be placed down to block us as soon as we made our move.

Your biggest opening in a battle is the moment you strike. I'd learned that the hard way in my last encounter with this lot. However, if I knew the intent behind the scene, then the answer before me was simple.

"Mind if I take this one?" I said.

"Tch, fine," Sieg replied. "I'll let ya have the first strike."

"What are you imbeciles blabbing about?!" the mage squealed. "Don't you dare approach me, scum! Are you *listening*?!"

I spun Schutzwolfe in my hand as I walked toward the mage, trying to convey utter confidence. I knew that the assassins wouldn't take the reverse bait of a bluff like this, but it was part of the show.

The stubbly mage twisted his body as he bent over the control panel, desperate to keep control of his formulae, but it was evident that he had no energy left to attack me while he was occupied with pushing back Nanna's assault from the outside. He was panicking like a boar stuck in a trap.

"Quit that!" he yelled. "Dammit! Very well, I'll change the size of the sphere of control..."

It was time to lay the pressure on a bit more.

I lethargically raised my sword and placed it upon the mage's shoulder. However, even as I gently stroked it across his robe, the assassins still wouldn't bite.

Fine, how's this, then?

“Do not move a single hair,” I said. “I’d advise you to watch how you swallow your spit, or even how you *breathe*.”

“Eep!”

I quickly put the tip of Schutzwolfe to his throat, making a show of how I was toying with him. My fingers were relaxed—as if I were holding a spoon, not a killing tool—but with just enough force to keep my blade perfectly steady. It was more than enough pressure to terrify the mage. If he dared to turn toward the control panel or even swallow too forcefully, then my blade would tear through.

I refused to kill him just yet. I controlled my bloodlust and upped the menace. I could see the saliva trickling from his lips—he would need to swallow it down soon enough. Schutzwolfe was sharp enough that a twitch from him would be enough to sever his carotid artery.

I *wanted* to take him in alive, but honestly, he was disposable. Our whole win condition here was halting the flow of Kykeon. Dealing with the creator and the assassins who played a hand in its proliferation were just bonus objectives. I’d sleep more soundly knowing this creep would be out of the picture, but it wasn’t an absolute necessity.

My trustworthy Fellows were hard at work right now, and I was sure they would pin down the requisite evidence, so we had a few moments to spare. I kept the pressure on his neck, my fingers clutching my sword tighter. Usually three inches was enough to kill a man, but I could do that with three millimeters.

I might slip if I sneeze, I thought. What’s your move?

It didn’t take long at all—I’d won.

As soon as I felt their presence, I slid one step backward.

“Hm?!” came a confused grunt.

As I went into a quick reverse, I saw a fist striking at where my shadow had just been. From atop the closest vat came an arachne’s garotte wire that caught

nothing.

“I was getting rather nervous!” Margit said.

I’d only been able to make such a speedy retreat thanks to the bundle of Margit’s fine thread tethered to my back. We had worked out this pulley method using the same fundamental process that kept us connected with our analog Voice Transfer. I used the smallest output of Unseen Hands as I could to lift my body up a paper’s width above the ground, and with this minuscule platform, Margit could pull me without friction slowing me down.

“Whoa! Here too?!”

“Eep!”

“Raaah?!”

I heard three voices all at once. I cast a quick Farsight spell so I could scope out the battlefield without turning around. Siegfried had just blocked an attack from the hlessi, who had just launched themselves from the top of another vat. Kaya and Etan shouted in surprise as a mighty arrow bounced off his equally mighty shield. *Nice one, Etan!* I was sure that smothering the tower shield in the arrow-ward had helped, but he was a reliable backliner who could easily protect Kaya from an attack like that.

“You really are a twisted man... To think you would use yourself as bait.”

“That’s rich, coming from you.”

My plan had worked—I had reeled them in out of the shadows. Beatrix had reset from her opening attack; this time we were a comfortable distance apart. Only a small part of Beatrix’s body was exposed from the pool of shadow. I wondered if she’d slink back into hiding, but she pulled herself out and took up a fighting stance.

Our distance was far more suited to swordplay than fistfighting. I would be able to step and slice before her fist could make contact.

I changed my sword’s position and launched into a powerful thrust. I’d taken the grip in both hands now for that extra bit of power and accuracy.

“Ngh!”

Beatrix rolled back out of desperation, but even with her evasive maneuvers, my thrusting steps closed that gap as fast as she opened it. No matter how much she tried to wriggle away, I could keep going.

After three strikes, Beatrix launched into action. Using the momentum from her roll, she used her upper body as a fulcrum and spun her legs in a terrifying *meia lua de compasso*! As much as it might have resembled a breakdance move, she hadn't switched into such a maneuver purely for style points. She was capitalizing on her legs' superior reach to match the pressure I'd created.

However, I had foreseen this too.

Kicks tended to be aimed for the opponent's midriff. I had chosen a form where I could easily deflect or strike back with my sword, holding the blade parallel to the ground. In other words, it only took a tiny adjustment to switch into horizontal sweeps.

"Grh..."

I sliced through her leather boot, parting flesh and striking bone. I'd used her momentum against her and tried to cut clean through her shin, but...

"Not deep enough..." I muttered.

Beatrix had shifted her stance to readjust her arc and brute-force her way into shutting down my slash. Evidently, receiving a deep wound was vastly preferable to losing a limb. She moved into a position where I thought she was switching into a headstand, but she used the strength in her arms alone to push off the ground and leap back to her feet.

She was good. I mentally applauded her quick thinking to cut her losses and switch from offense to defense.

I wondered if it was because we had the morale boost of inching ever closer to our goals, while they were moving ever further from theirs, that had given me the upper hand today. Moreover, *this time* I had *Schutzwolfe*—an extension of my arm itself—and I wasn't fighting in extremely close quarters either. I hoped they hadn't thought my showing in that warehouse was my best.

"Sisker!"

“No interruptions, please!”

I heard the sound of a loosed arrow and insect wings in flight. With her crossbow, Margit had leaped into combat with the kaggen, who hadn't made a move until now, to shut down any chance of her intercepting me. The sudden counter had forced the kaggen to switch from offense to defense on a dime. Her flight was disrupted, and she went careening toward the wall. It would've been real nice if she'd crashed into it, but she was an insectoid demihuman—she stuck the landing with steady footing.

We hadn't yet neutralized anyone, but things were going pretty damn smoothly. The board was in our favor.

Our enemies specialized in sneaky formations to take down their prey without being spotted, but out here in the open it was simply business as usual for us. They wanted to launch a counterattack, and so I'd simply countered it before they could strike. I was almost certain that this had annoyed them to no end.

“Doing all right, Siegfried?!”

“I should be asking you that! Watch yourself!”

Having just stopped a double-bladed surprise attack, Siegfried's enemy froze just for a moment as their daggers caught fast in his spear shaft. My comrade made use of this microsecond of an opening to launch a powerful fist right into their cloaked body. Siegfried was beautifully demonstrating the Fellowship's teachings to not become overly reliant on your weapon. His fist sent the hlessi spinning away. They bounced a few times, but from the way they were trying to stay on their feet it looked like they weren't too confident in their resilience. Lapine races had infamously weak skeletons, and this one's piss-poor armor wasn't helping. Of course, they had picked their cloak to prioritize speed and allow them to kill before they were hit, but it was a painful drawback in a real melee.

“Etan!” I shouted.

“I-I'm fine, Boss!” came the reply. “They'll have to step over my dead body before they lay a hand on Big Sis!”

“I can lend support anytime!” Kaya added.

Our rearguard was pushing back just fine, which was a load off my mind. Kaya hadn't buffed herself with a constant barrier or physical enhancements, so we needed to be careful with our formation to prevent anything unexpected.

"Leader!"

"Don't move yet! I'm fine!"

From atop the vats, the huntsman arachne called down as she lay in wait. She was watching the scene, but Beatrix had told her to stay. Beatrix had prevented the worst-case scenario, but her left leg was heavily wounded. I had sliced from the front, so I hadn't severed her tendons, but I had chipped bone. Her posture tilted to the right, showing that she wasn't immune to the pain.

Beatrix was holding the right side of her body forward, her right fist kept in front of her chest at the ready. She brandished a blade in the other hand. Despite the power flowing through her, I couldn't sense the same pungent aura of death as before. *Aha*, I thought, *her pivot foot is her left*. The assassin still had ample ability to kill, but from all the blood trickling from the gash in her boot, it was clear that her power had been severely reduced. Even if she had trained herself to be ambidextrous with her legs too, it was a difficult task to get rid of the innate advantage given to you from your dominant side.

I remembered status effects being a pretty brutal side to many TRPGs, and having one of your limbs knocked out of commission was enough to give you a huge debuff too. That went extra for a fistfighter who loved grappling at butterfly-kiss range.

We hadn't reached a checkmate just yet, but I could see the route that would lead us there. If I could remove my limiters then this last push would be so much easier...

"I'll ask you once more," I said. "If you surrender, then I shall reward you in kind."

"Allow me to ask something..." Beatrix replied. "Have you ever met an adventurer who would retreat from the battlefield?"

"I see... Fine logic."

It looked like she wouldn't back down so simply.

“Yes... An adventurer who backs down is an adventurer no more. Blasted thing... Proving to be more hindrance than help.”

The mask she was wearing must have been obscuring her vision. I allowed her to remove it. Situations like these warranted both sides giving it their all. If you didn't let your opponent take you on with all their strength and then lose, then who knew how many times they would get up for more? A fair battle was the simplest and quickest way to secure a speedy end.

“Bea?!” the hlessi called.

“Whew...” Beatrix said. “What will a little despair do to slow me? It is a far more troubling poison to have my vision marred fighting a man as talented as this to the death...”



Beatrix tossed her mask aside. From her face, I could see that the blue smoke wasn't affecting her. Nanna's force field neutralized this poison for us alone, so either she had an iron will, or she had worked out an innate internal defense system to prevent it from affecting her.

It didn't matter, as long as she could fight. Beatrix knew that one blow wouldn't be enough to kill me, and so if she kept her mask on, she would be gradually worn down until she met her demise.

The next move would decide this battle.

"I apologize for keeping you waiting..." she said.

"No apologies needed," I replied. "I understand a lady needs time to get prepared. I'm not so small a man as to complain when a woman is dressing herself for a special occasion."

"My, what a gentleman... I didn't think I'd receive such passionate remarks in the heat of battle."

The assassin gave a wolfish grin as she beckoned me to battle; I gave a smirk of my own in return.

The battlefield was stalling. The kaggen and the huntsman arachne were busy being kept in check by Margit, and they couldn't act rashly for fear of distracting their leader. Siegfried and his mighty spear kept the hlessi locked down. His weapon was a weighty thing, perhaps three times thicker than your average spear. Unlike my sword, it had enough weight to force its way back even if two blades struck at it simultaneously.

The vierman was hiding as usual. With her hidden, Kaya couldn't move freely and we had to constantly be on guard for any sudden called shots. However, considering the explosive impact of her arrows, I imagined that she didn't want to shoot if there was even a slim chance that she could hit her leader.

Such was the situation. My victory here would decide the flow of the entire battle.

I took my favored position and dashed ahead, with my center of gravity slightly forward. I had my blade at the ready, not quite lined up to pop off

another Schism just yet. As I closed with Beatrix, she unleashed an unexpected move.

“YAAAAH!”

She’s kicking with her left leg?! The one I mangled?!

Her leg aimed high. On pure instinct, I brought up Schutzwolfe to counter the incoming kick, this time managing to slice right through at around knee height. A great gush of blood came pouring forth from the wound.

“Ngh... My eye!”

This woman’s mad! Beatrix had sacrificed her leg and used some kind of physical buff spell to raise her blood pressure high enough to blind me! *Who the hell thinks of something like this?!*

I had figured she was up to *something* when her swinging kick came. Although I hadn’t managed to cover my face with some Unseen Hands, I had spent enough physical training preparing for the possibility that my enemy would go for my eyes to know how to react in the moment. This wasn’t something honed with the Fellowship; this was a practically bone-deep response drilled into me from the time with the Watch.

There are three possibilities that lead a skilled swordsman to meet his end on the battlefield. Overwhelming numbers, exhaustion from a never-ending gauntlet of battles, and involuntary movement prompted by dirty tricks—like having your eyes gouged out.

As soon as I knew the fountain of blood was coming for my face, I closed my right eye and kept the left open so that I wouldn’t miss a moment of the battle until it hit. As soon as I felt the warm splash upon me, I switched eyes. If I hadn’t ground this reaction all the way in, then I would have lost both my eyes.

...Hold on. For some reason, my left eye felt strangely...hot. It didn’t feel like blood had splashed on me, but boiling water. It continued to sting, as if it were inflamed or something. What a crooked technique! So it wasn’t just that she had poisonous *hands*; her *whole body* was toxic! She wasn’t bad looking—had she given other victims of hers a literal kiss of death in the past?!

“How long can you put up with it?” Beatrix shouted.

The assassin must have been confident in her technique if she was willing to sacrifice an entire limb for it. However, as I stared back at her with my remaining good eye, she was plainly surprised. She used her momentum to continue her dance and aimed another kick at me. All I needed to do was take her *other* leg.

My eye hurt. Under my closed lid, it felt like my eyeball was sizzling away to nothing. I shelved away the pain; if I let it distract me from performing at my best, then I wasn't worthy of calling myself a Fellow of the blade.

Centrifugal force sent Beatrix's spinning kick toward me. I prepared my sword once more and received her attack. Her own speed had let my cut go cleanly through, and her lower leg came spinning away.

However, this time her sacrifice was a feint. As blood coated the floor, Beatrix slipped into my shadow.

The huntsman and the kaggen cried out at once.

"Together now, Primanne!"

"Of course!"

"I don't think so!" Margit cut in.

I had been so focused on Beatrix's kick that I had allowed her to escape into the shadows. Instantaneously, the two other nearby assassins had clocked this as the perfect moment to strike. Margit leaped once more into action to protect me. The two demihumans were gunning at me, planning to use their greater size to crush me, or at least slow me down. With shear-hands and garrote wire raised, it was obvious from their postures as they soared through the air that they had not factored in a safe landing.

"Margit!"

"Of course!"

My partner and I were perfectly in sync. It only took one word from me for her to know what I wanted from her. There was nothing more encouraging than a partner you could give your back to. I stumbled slightly as she did a half-turn around my body. It was a mite embarrassing, but I managed a perfectly capable

sword swing. Margit wasn't finished either. My partner knew the shape of my body perfectly, and so she took just the right moment to fire her shortbow from underneath my arm at our foe just as I finished my follow-through.

“Grk!”

“Aagh!”

Margit's target was the huntsman arachne; mine was the kaggen. The one named Primanne came a beat earlier thanks to the speed boost from her wings.

I made a clean cut through her scythe-like limbs; Margit's arrow pierced the arachne's mouth. Both were more than enough to incapacitate them. Still, they still tried to use their descent to knock us down. I relaxed all but my core, and my partner shifted her weight. I moved like a puppet on a string, and my body was pulled safely out of harm's way.

It was close—the dice had decided that I had *just* passed that check—and I could practically smell them as they passed by and crashed into the ground. They went tumbling away, inertia refusing to loosen its grip. It might have been fight-endingly bad if they'd *landed* that charge.

“Wouldja mind not flirting mid-fight...?” Siegfried complained as he grappled with the hlessi and their complex onslaught of spins and stabbing strikes.

I felt he was misunderstanding our teamwork. I'd have told him as much, but there was no time for banter.

“YAAAAAGH!”

Like a falling drop of water, Beatrix came pelting toward us from a shadow on the ceiling.

I realized that those two assassins had set into their suicide strike because they'd wanted to draw our attention away from Beatrix. Unfortunately for them, I had seen her meld with the darkness with my own two eyes. I was certain that she hadn't been running away. A surprise attack from above had always been on the table.

Without legs, there were only so many ways that she could buy herself momentum again. Now in freefall, Beatrix had used the unrelenting power of

gravity for a velocity boost on par with her own abilities on the ground.

The ceiling was high up. With the boost from her aerodynamic figure and no drag to speak of from her legs, she'd hit terminal velocity early in the drop. Her height and frame were bulked out by her armor, bringing her easily above seventy kilograms. She must have been rocketing toward us at around two hundred kilometers per hour.

At that speed she'd die if she landed wrong. She let out a fierce shout to squeeze out all of her remaining energy. Her left arm was held in front like a shield; her right was held close to her side. Everything suggested that this was to be her last attack, a total desperation strike.

If I didn't put up a *perfect* defense, I would be dead. I couldn't dodge clear of it either. Judging by her speed, by the time she hit the ground she would collide with my shadow. She could simply dive into it and chain into another attack. I was happy to take on her kamikaze attack, but I didn't want to give her the option to change course and aim for Kaya or Siegfried instead.

I was a man—if she wanted my blood, then I would gladly take her on.

I had left Margit in charge of evading the last two, so I was still in full form. I had enough strength left to unleash a solid blow. Slashing above your head was a difficult task with a mensch's physiology, and Hybrid Sword Arts weren't best suited for it either, but all the same I needed to show my stuff.

This wasn't a move you were supposed to use with a double-edged sword, but I held it high and braced my left arm against the blade. There would be no swing. I would meet her right here, solid and unmoving, and if I held fast, she would part around me.

Beatrix would be here in the next eyeblink.

The assassin unleashed her spear-hand strike. In the exact same moment, I pushed my sword forward to meet her. Her speed turned against her as my razor-sharp sword made contact. It didn't take much strength at all to make this cut; all I needed to do was stay firm.

I met her gauntlet-crushing spear-hand with my sword. After an imperceptibly quick moment, I felt the impact ripple down my arm. My sword pierced her

glove, dug into her flesh, and shattered through her bones. I had bested her in the clash. My sword shredded through her arm.

“Ngh...” Beatrix groaned. “Graaah! NOW!”

My strike had knocked her off her original trajectory. She reached out her left hand and grabbed the collar of my armor as she fell. I couldn't keep my poise any longer. I collapsed. Margit was forced to leap off.

Even this full-body assault was just a distraction! That explained why she had fallen with such a disregard for her landing.

From a beam up on the ceiling, I felt a welling bloodlust. It was the vierman. In her hands was a mighty bow, supported by her two left hands. The bowstring groaned like steel cables on a bridge in a heavy storm. She must have judged this to be her final chance to strike.

Unlike last time, she had pulled the string back with her two right hands right up to her cheek. It was a full-power shot, with the capacity to injure *her* if she misjudged it. She was ready to unleash the mightiest shot we'd ever seen out of her.

I couldn't avoid it like this, and I couldn't take it head-on either. I considered creating a barrier with space-time magic, but the room was thick with mana. I didn't want to set off any kind of accidental chain reaction with such a potent spell. The scale of the possible explosion would make divine retribution look *petty*.

“Kaya! A—” I said.

“I'm already on it!” came the quick reply.

It was as our reliable herbalist had said—her sling-staff was all set. A potion was safely cradled in a pouch attached to a seaweed rope. The bottle went soaring through the air before the vierman could loose her shot. The sling-staff made up for Kaya's lack of physical strength—her magical missile flew farther and more accurately than any throw could manage. It didn't matter too much, given the concoction inside. The bottle shattered and cast its arrow-warding mist around the area.

“Whoa?!” came Kaya's own confused response.

It had taken a little while for me to realize that even if it was the same concoction, the potions that Kaya used herself were always far more potent than if anyone else used them. Sure, arguably she wasn't too skilled at manifesting magic through her staff, but she had grown fully capable of refining the spells that she brewed up.

When it came to the arrow-ward, it didn't stop at just arrows. It was potent enough to eat away at the bow itself. In almost no time at all, the mist seeped deep into the vierman's bow and caused the body and the string to break down. This was a mighty bow that a normal person couldn't even draw an inch; the damage from the snapback would be huge. As the bow started to fall apart, the tension in the bowstring released, causing the remaining pieces to go haywire; the arrow misfired and the string hit her right in the face. A huge gash opened up on her face and lip, and a tooth leaped from its place in her jaw. The bow couldn't stand the weight of the damage it had received. It shattered, and the pieces flew out of her hands.

Even the vierman couldn't handle such a mighty whiplash. She covered her face in her hands as she fell from the rafters.

"Gurgh!" she said as she fell.

The first to react was the huntsman arachne, still with an arrow stuck in her jaw.

Margit had aimed true. The arrow hadn't gone straight through—in addition, it wasn't tipped with poison, as ideally we wanted to capture the assassins alive—and hadn't been a fatal hit. She pooled her little remaining strength to dash across the room to catch her falling comrade.

Back at the table, there were only a few things that killed min-maxed adventurers: suffocation or irreducible fall damage. How many foolish adventurers had plunged to their deaths in an attempt to prove their guts after being told that *anyone* would die if they fell from a height of ten meters?

The next to react was Beatrix, who still had me pinned down. She used her remaining hand to claw her way up my body and opened her mouth to reveal a tongue tattooed with another lily of the valley.

Ahh, so she does have the kiss of death as part of her arsenal, I thought. With

both legs out of commission, one arm sliced through, and the other grabbing my armor, the only way left to kill me was through her toxic bodily fluids.

As the idle and irrelevant thought that she certainly had the looks for honeypot assassinations flitted through my mind, her face closed in on mine.

“I warned you about looking at my man the wrong way!” Margit said.

Just as our lips were about to touch, I felt soft flesh upon them. Margit had blocked the kiss with her own hand.

I made use of the moment’s opening to deliver a big kick. Beatrix let out a spluttering groan. With only one limb left, it seemed like she had finally run out of energy. She had lost a lot of blood already, and my kick had told me that I’d just broken a few ribs in the process. She was a professional, it was true, but even someone of her caliber wouldn’t be able to stay conscious with this much damage.

“Bea... You o’ay?!” came the hlessi’s voice.

“Don’t you dare move,” came Siegfried’s curt reply. “I’m bad at judgin’ my strength.”

The hlessi had evidently cottoned on to the fact that all four of their allies had been felled. Siegfried didn’t miss the opening. He used the butt end of his spear to finally pin his foe and placed his foot on them for good measure.

“Dammit...” he muttered. “My body count’s *still* trailing...”

The hlessi tried to squirm free, but with my comrade’s heavy boot upon them, they had no way out. We’d trained him too well to capitalize on their moment of helplessness to cause them undue harm. He used his spear to push away the hlessi’s daggers, then placed the business end to their neck to warn them to stay still.

“Bea... Bea...!”

“Stop moving!” Siegfried said. “Dammit... I know this is the best way of doin’ this, but you’re makin’ *me* feel like the bad guy...”

And with everyone neutralized our mission was comple—

“Blood and *stars*! Useless, *useless* adventurers! Stand up! Get back to work!

My despair hasn't yet run its course!"

Oh yeah, this guy. He had been squealing all throughout the battle, but I'd tuned him out.

"Margit, stay on guard, please," I said. "Kaya! Tend to the wounded!"

"W-Waaah!" Kaya screamed. "Erich?! I think you're the most wounded here! Your f-face, it's...it's *bubbling!*"

As I was giving the order to Siegfried and Etan to knock out our opponents for good measure, Kaya came dashing up to me, her face as white as a sheet.

In the chaos of the battle, I'd forgotten that Beatrix had slung her toxic blood over half of my face. That wasn't to say it didn't hurt—stung like hell, in fact—but I'd filed it away under "beats dyin'."

"Holy crap..." my comrade said. "Erich... Your face is somethin' else...!"

"Huh? Really, guys? It hurts, but..." I said.

"O-Okay, we'll sanitize your eye first!" Kaya said. "Stay right there! Don't you dare move!"

As she wiped away the blood with short, firm strokes, I heard a strange ripping sound and felt something fall from my face. It *was* my face. More accurately, the skin Beatrix's poison had killed.

"Eep..."

Seeing my own decayed flesh made a squeak escape my throat. I could hear the telltale rattling of a SAN check in the confines of my skull.

Seriously? I thought. *I'm gonna be okay...right? Right?! It'll go back to normal, won't it? I'll be able to see again, won't I?! I might've said it would be cool to be a one-eyed warrior like Date Masamune, but I don't want any kind of grotesque injury that will send my APP into free fall!*

"W-Wow... Y-Your eye is...not a color a mensch eye should be..." Margit said.

"D-Don't frighten me like that!" I yelled. "Margit, don't! Don't tell me what's happening!"

"Calm down, Erich!" Kaya said. "If your pulse rises, the toxins will be carried

around your body more quickly! It's only gone skin deep, so I'll do what I can to deal with it!"

Kaya's work was quick and efficient even as I panicked. Thanks to her incredible handiwork, the pain was gone in no time. She applied distilled water to remove any toxins and used a razor to cut away the remaining dead tissue. It was only after she applied a healing potion and told me that I would be back to normal—healed perfectly nice and cleanly even without the boon of an alfish favor, apparently—that I could finally relax.

"Your eye will take more time to heal, I'm afraid," Kaya said. "It might take up to twenty days for your vision to return, but you'll need to keep taking eye drops for the next season or so. You'll need an eye patch for a while too."

"Th-Thank goodness..." I said. "Thanks Kaya. I'm just happy so long as I can see again. I mean...eye patches are cool, but it'd totally throw off my depth perception."

"You worry about the weirdest shit, I swear!" Sieg said.

I was thrilled. I had chosen to ignore Kaya's comment that if she had been even half a minute later in treating me, then my eye might have fizzled into sludge.

DoT-damage poisons were terrifying stuff. They were kind of boring in TRPGs, so I'd not given them much thought, but they weren't something you *ever* wanted to deal with in real life.

Now that I was calm and knew I'd be fine, I found the worst parts of my brain succumbing to runaway thoughts of how cool it would be to have a magical eye in a different color, or how baller I'd look as your prototypical eye patch-wearing swashbuckler... Fortunately a brief reality check sobered me.

Despite our fiddling and gabbing, none of the assassins had managed to get up. We hadn't finished this quite in one piece, but our mission to neutralize the factory was a success.

[Tips] Status ailments chiefly ramify during battle, but they can cause dreadful lasting effects afterward if correct treatment isn't given or if physical

checks are failed.

Ending

Ending

Just because the affair has been brought to an end doesn't mean that everything will wrap up nicely. If the players wish to continue their adventures at the table, the conclusion to one affair can be the precursor to ever greater incidents.

"A duller conclusion than I imagined," Nanna muttered to herself. The mage was crumpled on the floor with a sack on his head. Nanna gave his stomach a kick as she muttered.

Evidently, she didn't want to believe that all the chaos caused to Marsheim came from a man who merely wished to share his unhappiness with the world.

The man known as Durante was a talented mage; he'd concocted something so complex that neither Nanna nor Kaya could trace the product back to its base ingredients. Yet his motives were bottom tier.

After Durante had been captured by the Fellowship of the Blade, he spat nails and hellfire at Nanna, claiming that she was a fool who knew nothing of despair. It was probably in that moment that her interest in Durante evaporated. Although he had played his role in this well, he was just a depraved fool at the end of it all. Not only that, the kind who felt that *their* despair was the worst that the world had to offer.

As if despair were anything precious, anything rare. Each person's suffering was unique, to be sure, more so than their happiness; joy tended to resemble itself no matter whose it was. But all despair *was* alike in its habit of swallowing folk whole when they went probing for where it bottomed out.

Nanna was all too familiar with it. When she found her talents paled in comparison to others; when she realized she couldn't do a thing for her friend's color blindness; when in the wake of her pursuit of taboo spiritual affairs she

had to escape all the way here to Ende Erde. From time to time she would clutch her head in her hands and wish for death before a deeper despair that she never knew existed would come knocking once more. It refused to abate even after she realized that both pain and joy could be conjured from less than a medicine spoon's worth of powder.

“Death, indeed... In the end, his anguish was cheaply bought...”

While Nanna was neutralizing the blue smoke, she had touched upon Durante's heart in quite the fundamental manner. Apparently Kykeon was but a catalyst by which he wanted to flood his despair into the hearts of the masses. Kykeon pushed the brain into a state of trance, and the empty space left the user receptive to anyone who knew how to broadcast.

However fair his grievances, it was over the line for him to want to immure the whole world in his mourning for his family and home. It was a pitiful script, written by the untethered pain of an angry man. Perhaps that was what made him so pliant.

“He's been able to read all sorts of communiques...from Seine, the old languages used by the local lords, and even branch languages from the satellite states... How pitiful to be so used...”

A vehicle needs an engine to run, but no one would stop you from putting a *different* engine inside. Durante had been used because while he'd come up with quite the ingenious little drug, if he had failed, someone else would have been found to take his place. And the truth of the situation was that here he was, cut off and abandoned alongside his lackeys.

“Ahh, but the roots run deep...too deep... What to do...?”

Even if the script itself was cheap, the fact that Durante had such powerful backers was not a good sign. From looking through the various documents that Erich and his people had brought together—left in the basement, apparently having missed their ship to be incinerated—it looked like this incident couldn't just be swept under the rug as an outburst from the local lords. Powerful players who sought to gain from the Empire's weakened state were making their move on Ende Erde, planting seeds of strife that only needed a little water and encouragement to sprout.

This case with Durante and Kykeon was but *one* of these seeds. It wasn't worth celebrating the extermination of this one weed when you thought of the many that would crop up before too long.

Durante's fundamental beliefs had led him and Nanna to be like oil and water. All the same, she acknowledged his skills. He had managed to work with the capricious arcane furnace, create a drug that even Nanna couldn't deconstruct when she had it in front of her, and had almost succeeded in bringing a whole city to its knees through a magically powered addiction. And here he was, easily tossed aside. She didn't know how many irons the true engineers of this plot had in the fire, waiting to be revealed.

"I feel quite the headache coming on... I want to head back...and resume my research... Although...his techniques won't be all that useful..."

The Empire had become, for better or worse, far too settled. Not only that, it had reached the dismayingly logical conclusion that if it were able to make a display of its strength, then it would be possible to silence all of those around it for good.

The Trialist Empire of Rhine was truly a haven for bureaucrats and people who foolishly believed in said bureaucracy, tucked up safely in their bastions of logic and knowledge. However, their optimism blinded them. The irrational belief that no one would wage a war that they couldn't win had taken all too many victims throughout the long course of history.

Nanna was annoyed that they had perhaps made too big a show of demonstrating the aership. Even out here in the Empire's western periphery, despite having long since left the College, Nanna still received information from her connections. Plans had been sped along over the past few years and now they didn't have a mere *prototype*—no, they had plans to mass-produce these things. By now they were deliberating on where to place the munitions factories.

Aerships had been unreliable things over the course of their history. It took vast amounts of mana to supply lift and strength to these gargantuan crafts, and earlier models could only just about carry themselves through the air. Carrying cargo would have been impossible, and so military use had been out of

the question. Many had seen them more like art pieces, like a nice model that you could place in your garden pond and watch on a calm day.

But what of it now? The prototype ship, the *Alexandrine*, could hold hundreds of people and enough provisions to feed every mouth for a month without stopping to restock. It had a strong outer body that would protect it from Great Work magic, as well as multilayered arcane barriers.

A ball had been hosted in its bilge, and although many deemed the size a waste of space, those with a keen military eye all had the same thought in their heads as they walked in: How many soldiers could we fit into this ballroom? Or how many combustibles could be packed in here, ready to be off-loaded onto an unsuspecting city below? Any present-day doctrines about how best to protect your city would become relics of the past in a flicker.

On the day that a fleet of ten or even twenty of these aeroships came over the horizon, any and all preexisting national philosophies of war would be a thing of the past. Imagine you were faced with these unreachable beasts, with half a million soldiers in their bellies, flying at the speed of a drake. It didn't matter what protective measures you had installed where—your city, your capital even, would receive a direct and devastating assault.

If a nation decided to pool its efforts to build a city that *could* withstand the assault, the mobility granted by the aeroships would allow the Empire to simply take their business elsewhere and strike at any weak point they wanted. It was impossible to claim the advantage in any clash. If the Empire's forces were pushed to a location that they didn't like, they could pack up and leave.

The scale of their potential power was a nightmare.

In the face of the terrifying presence of thousands upon thousands of soldiers in the sky, there would be many territorial leaders who would desire to switch sides. Some of the more patient members of longer-lived races would spend decades weaving plans that would allow for a gradual transition to the Imperial side.

The aeroship was a strategic wild card—both in the realm of politics and on the battlefield. Without a large ice-free port, the Empire had begun work on how to improve its shipping capabilities. This technology had evolved into

something that would shake the world to its core. Its impacts would be far, far greater than those who'd dreamed it up could have conceived.

Various other nations had laughed at the Empire, berating them for their foolish attempts to conquer the realm of dragons and to deliver goods by the *air*. Even if they made attempts to try and play catch-up, the advantage given by the Empire's head start was incalculable. Technology and talent weren't something you could just bring into the world by throwing money at people. Even if you did have one such genius, it was all too much work for a single person to complete on their own.

If the other nations played their cards wrong, the skies would be Rhine's for the next hundred years.

The fear of the Empire would drive other great nations to nip the problem of their neighbor in the bud. If that weren't possible, then they could at least attempt to create a situation that would make it difficult for them to focus on putting their time and money into the aership enterprise.

It didn't matter that the Empire wasn't taking an expansionist approach right now. To their neighbors, the fear that they *could* take over all who surrounded them meant that the situation could not be tolerated.

Even the satellite states who dreamed, just like the local lords of Ende Erde, for the day they would escape from the yoke of the Empire and reclaim their independence and glory could not sit in peace.

Buffer states were a compromise that only existed because two larger nations didn't want to share borders. If they saw a future where a distant emperor decided on a whim that they were no longer necessary and they would be subsequently swallowed up, then there was no chance they would sit still. They would gather people, resources, money and set to work on schemes that would make the scales tip in the right way.

"People...truly are foolish creatures..."

Nanna imagined future evils that would make Kykeon look positively cute. She almost wished she could surrender herself to her despair as easily as this fool had. Unfortunately it wasn't so easy a task to sit down with your knees in your arms and let the void take you. Maybes, possibilities, the idea that perhaps an

inexhaustible amount of effort might get you to the ideals you sought offered a battered life preserver that you could hang onto in an ocean of despair. There was always that thin ray of optimism that kept a body clinging to life even as the spirit begged for death, blind to the idea that holding fast only invited more pain. And even if you did realize that, the hope would still hurt.

“Now then, I suppose we should hand this one off to the Madam Manager...and see how much cleaner things will become here...”

Nanna didn't sound convinced. It was a tricky situation. There were too many people involved in this scheme. If they made drastic cuts without enough forethought, then it could lead to the very revolts they were trying to quell. They couldn't deal with all the relevant parties in secret either, as the scope stretched too wide. They didn't even have enough decent evidence to pin down everyone who was implicit in *this* scheme.

Documents remained that detailed certain aspects of the Kykeon plot, but in truth most of the important documents had already been burned. The contents of Durante's own personal safe in his room had turned to naught but cinders before anyone had even got there. The circumstances meant that they had to treat this as essentially a one-man scheme.

“Ahh... It's all so...*small*... How tiring indeed...”

Nanna gave Durante's stomach another kick, but all she got in response was a weak groan. She wouldn't get anything she wanted—not the answers around the Kykeon plot, not the truth of how to create a world free of malady, not the method to remove pain and suffering from this life.

It was no surprise that Nanna let out a deep, tired sigh as she realized that this huge and roundabout plot they had worked together to bring to close was merely one weed in a field rife with them.

All the same, she settled herself with the satisfaction that she had won today's little competition to see whose despair trumped whose. With these thoughts in head, Nanna let out a puff of smoke.

[Tips] Although the concept of global hegemony does not yet exist, wise folk around the world are able to sense that such a thing is nigh.

And so we destroyed the wicked mage's base and rounded up his underlings. The end.

Obviously none of what we'd been through up to this point would have been half as difficult if we could wrap things up that easily *now*. If you asked me this whole affair was *orders of magnitude* too complicated.

After we cleaned up the makeshift bedroom in the factory, I peered at my reflection in my hand mirror and let out a groan.

"Jeez," I said. "And again it looks like I'm the most injured one out of us all..."

"Looks like? You totally are," came a curt reply from my comrade.

With a bandage wrapped around the left side of my face, I looked like a complete wreck. Luckily my hair had avoided any damage, but I didn't look good.

"Yeah, but Etan apparently fractured his clavicle tanking that arrow," I said.

"Did you see the size of it? If I'd been the one with the shield I totally would've died. He got off lightly if ya ask me."

"Well, what about our Fellows? They got injured too."

"Hello, Erich? What's got you so inclined to turn this into a pissing contest? Wasn't it *you* who said that anything other than losin' your thumb or arm should count as a 'minor' injury...?"

Our people had come out the other side of a bloody fray; now they were readying some booze they'd brought along for a little postbattle celebration. It didn't feel good that I was the only one who had to swear off alcohol and smoking for bed rest *yet again*.

"Whuh?!"

"What is it now, man? You havin' one of your usual weird outbursts? Put it in words that I can understand."

It just felt bad, man! Everyone else was up and walking, but here I was, looking thoroughly chewed up. I didn't want people to get used to worrying

about me, if only for my rep's sake.

"Tch, I was stupid for wantin' to come in and check on ya..."

"Sorry for leaving most of the cleanup to you, Siegfried."

"You don't gotta apologize. Kaya's the one who said you need to stay put."

The Fellowship of the Blade's resident herbalist wasn't one to be ignored. When she finished patching up my face, she told me to drink another antidote and hit the sack. After the five assassins had been nicely tied up, Siegfried had been left in charge of all the other boring stuff to do.

But I wasn't lying about how I felt, despite my appearance. Compared to breaking my arm the other day, I was downright *peachy*. At least I didn't have a fever this time.

"Kaya took off their clothes and put them in some stuff we prepared just in case they were hidin' anything. Then we tied 'em up again in those knots you said no one can slip out of. People from the Association are gonna come pick them up later, so just chill out, okay?"

As Siegfried had said, we had made sure our quarry had no means of causing harm left to them and tied them up in the basement. Fortunately the three who had been heavily injured were out of the woods. We couldn't reattach Beatrix's lost limbs, but she wouldn't die, at least.

Lady Maxine would decide what to do with them. She had told us that we had permission to kill them if the situation demanded it, but I felt it would be better to keep them alive. I had been waiting to do any questioning until they came back around, but it might be days until they woke up, considering the extent of their injuries.

"Hey, Boss, they're awake and kicking."

Speak of the devil...or Diablo. Gerrit had walked in right on cue. I put down my mirror.

"All of them?"

"Yes, seems so...although one of them can't really speak."

"That's fine, as long as their leader talks."

Siegfried shot me a fiery glare that said, *I ain't covering for you if Kaya blows up on you*, but I could worry about that later—this interrogation was important.

The Kykeon affair was over now. The problem was that the noisy mage who had made the stuff wasn't the true instigator of this whole mess. He was behind a lot of the scheming this time, but if you asked me, he was little more than a wild dog fed scraps from someone else's table to keep him eager to stir shit up.

There was no way that a plot that had almost toppled an entire city and put an entire region into chaos would fizzle out like this. If you asked me, it felt like we had merely cut short one scheme out of many.

Given that we'd found Kykeon's inventor here, odds were good that the other factory Mister Fidelio and the others were neutralizing wouldn't yield much more useful evidence than we already had. There were only a few mages and one unorthodox-looking priest left. The room they were working in seemed far too large for only a handful of people, so it was almost certain that many people had been here until only recently. Even the stacks and stacks of documents pointed toward that.

It was a shame that most of the evidence had been destroyed, but we did have one slender thread that would lead us to our mastermind's mastermind: the five assassins.

"There you go walking off again," Margit said. "It's dangerous with only one eye, you know?"

"I'm fine, Margit," I said. "My dominant eye is my right one. My depth perception is fine."

Despite our assassins' horrible wounds, they were still professionals of their craft. I had asked Margit to stay on guard on the off chance they tried anything. The other three would cover her shift when she took some rest.

"Mmf, mmf."

As I walked into the room, Beatrix greeted me.

"Oh yes, I forgot about the gag."

Beatrix used her left arm to force herself up. Her right arm was gone now, so I

guessed that Kaya must have decided it'd been beyond recovery. Around her mouth was a gag. Beatrix and the others would be valuable sources of information, so we didn't want them biting their tongues off to take any information with them to the grave.

"Take this gag off," she said. "I promise you I won't run or end my life prematurely."

Well, I assumed that was what she said—the gag really was on tight. As long as I kept my wits about me I could stop her from doing either of those things, so I decided to accede to her demand. That wasn't all. I didn't actually have totally foolproof means to keep her staying put. She had mixed metals into her tattoos to make them focus points for her magic, so when her mana recovered she could simply use that slippery shadow-meld trick of hers. Still she wasn't likely to get far without her legs, and I couldn't remain super paranoid forever.

I carefully removed the gag. Beatrix was surprisingly docile. She had tried to give me a kiss of death just earlier; I had braced myself for projectile venom-spittle, but it seemed my concerns were misplaced.

"*Whew...* You do have particular tastes, Goldilocks," she said. "I know we're all fetching women, but you didn't have to tie us up and throw us in here quite so roughly."

"Down to your last limb, and still you act like this," Margit said. "I shouldn't be surprised, really."

"I have an inkling of what you wish to ask," Beatrix went on. "However, I know little more than you."

"And you think I'll take you at your word?" I said.

"I could tell from clashing with you that your head isn't completely empty. I need not spell it out for you—we are tight-lipped and used to torture. You may not believe me, but there isn't an inch of my body that hasn't already been tainted by someone seeking revenge or information."

In truth, I wasn't surprised. Judging from today, she hadn't been working out of a sense of obligation or justice; their pride would keep them from spilling any intel. If you didn't have a psychological angle to work, torture was nigh on

useless as an information-gathering method.

“You don’t look the type to engage in such unsavory pastimes,” she went on.

“You never know—looks can be deceiving.”

Beatrix laughed. “Yes, quite right. Well, I’ll concede it’s not completely bad if the other person is good-looking.”

Bluffs just fizzled to nothing in front of her. Hoo boy, she’d one-upped me in our little game of “who’s got the edgier background.” She looked impossible to break.

If that was the case, I’d just be honest.

“You five are incredibly talented, so why?”

It was a pretty vague and open-ended question, but it had been sitting at the back of my mind this whole time. Through crossing blades with all of them, I could tell that they were seasoned veterans that you couldn’t find on any street corner. I knew that hlessil and kaggen were persecuted in certain regions, but this was the Empire. Sure, they might’ve struggled, but they could have made decent livings as honest adventurers.

What had led them to work under a madman whose only desire was to sow his own deepest despair in the hearts of others?

“Why? Why, you ask? A difficult question indeed...” It didn’t look like Beatrix was playing dumb or trying to deflect my question—she looked as if she were genuinely ruminating on how to answer. After a while, she went on, “The only reason I can give is because that was my decision. But I suppose...it was to return a favor. To clarify, I didn’t owe *him* any favors.”

“So to whom?”

“To someone completely irrelevant to this entire affair. I was told to help the mage in his ambitions and in return I would be told how I might avenge one of my lost allies.”

The way Beatrix spoke so easily about things that wouldn’t harm anyone was truly impressive. She was a real pro at this too—how many times had she fallen into the enemy’s hands only to return alive?

“You wish to know more about the one who was backing Durante, I am sure, but I am afraid that they are no longer in the Empire. I had followed Durante once in hopes that I might do some prying of my own, but the name and identity I dug up are fakes, proxies. I dared not dig any deeper to avoid meeting my own end.”

I was pretty confident in my own ability to see through lies, but Beatrix spoke so *easily* that I honestly couldn't tell. All I was certain about was that she was talented at singling out the questions whose answers mattered most to whether she lived or died.

No matter how much our Madam Manager squeezed Beatrix, I doubted there would be much to gain.

The only certainties we had were that she had aided in Durante's wicked deeds and that most of the evidence of said deeds had been dealt with. We had more than enough to stick her with a death sentence, and I had legitimate cause to kill her now if I wished. I couldn't do much about any loose ends being disposed of in the coming days and weeks.

Folk like these with decades or more of experience doing other folks' dirty work, completely unnoticed, scared me a hell of a lot more than any major league villain with a hefty bounty.

“What I *can* say was that they were quite the savvy individual,” Beatrix said. “They spoke Rhinian with a terribly thick Seineish accent, but it was most likely a cover.”

“Yes, any intelligence agent worth their salt can fake an accent or two,” I replied.

“Indeed. My affected manner of speaking leaves you uncertain of where I'm from too, does it not?”

That was it, wasn't it? Her striking image and ever so slightly out of date dialect confounded the question of where she'd come from. This was no mere dramaturgy; this was a mask she wore every day, refined through necessity and ingenious reasoning.

“This leaves me ever more uncertain as to why someone with your knowledge

and skills would embroil themselves in such foul doings. I ask you again, why?"

"I must say I'm a little surprised myself. This is just my own impressions talking, but from the looks of you, you've spent some time walking in the shadows yourself, have you not? Why can *you* stay out there in the light?"

Hold it there, Erich, I thought. I was playing too far into the home field of a talented manipulator. I had shown my hand too clearly. Leaning into my familiarity with her methods was all but a confession to my own dubious history. I would say that my own mental catalog of these skills had been built up from my past life at the table and during my dabbling in undercover work for Lady Agrippina, but I shouldn't have let her catch on.

Still I had to admit it was useful, being able to perfectly code-switch from palatial speech to the way people spoke in the rougher part of town. With the right foreign affectation you could deflect attention away from nearly anything else.

"Well, I can call it nothing but effort," I said.

"Effort, you say... I'd say that I put in quite the effort myself. All of us did, yet here we are. Such is fate, I suppose."

We had been talking for longer than I'd anticipated, but still Beatrix's voice seemed rather light. I didn't sense any mana waves coming from her lips either.

Ugh, she's probably realized by now that I'm talking to her more out of personal curiosity than anything else.

Could you blame me? She was the kind of battle-defining named NPC that couldn't *not* have a juicy backstory that the GM would resent me for overlooking. We had put our very lives on the line as we crossed blades and fists. It was completely natural for my interest to be piqued. In my past life I'd spent ages poring line by line over splatbook after splatbook full of deadly NPCs with bespoke flavor text unpacking the secret of their strength.

Unfortunately it looked like Beatrix wouldn't be quite so forthcoming with her past. I guessed she would take her secrets right to the grave. This was the sort of lore that you would only get from the GM once the story had wrapped up.

"So what do you want from us, now that fate has dealt its hand?"

“Nothing. All that’s left to do is to hand you all over to the Association manager.”

“Is that right... An appeal, if you would... Would you take my head alone in exchange for their lives?”

“Bea!”

The hlessi squeaked at Beatrix’s unsurprising request. Her lapine bone structure meant that the gag didn’t work properly on her nonmensch mouth.

I could only shake my head in response. The fact of the matter was that our outlook was better with them dead than alive. While I wouldn’t mind adding a group of talented assassins to my connections column, Lady Maxine was one of the people in charge of my home. If I let them go after all this, who knew what hell she would bring down upon me. That wasn’t even touching on Schnee or Fidelio. These five had almost brought complete disaster to Marsheim. They would not forgive me if I let them go now.

It was a shame, but my emotions didn’t weigh heavier than the reality.

“I thought that would be your answer,” said Beatrix. “A shame. My looks have reeled in plenty of your sort before, you know.”

“And how many of your catch are still alive?” I asked with a sigh. Beatrix merely shrugged her shoulders with the silent message that I was asking a ridiculous question.

This group traded in debts. It was obvious what would happen when the accounts were settled.

“Well, I think I’ve asked most of what I wanted to,” I said.

“Hold on, Goldilocks Erich.”

Just as I was about to reattach the gag, Beatrix raised her hand to stop me. She had something important to say. I tensed up in case she was going to try something funny, but there wasn’t any point.

“Don’t become like us,” she said. “Even when you are looking at the world through clear eyes and working with steady hands, the world can fall out from beneath you with one mistake. Choose jobs that serve your goals. This is the

least advice I can give you as your senior.”

“Your advice has been well received,” I said after a moment’s pause.

What was she warning me about?

I reattached the gag and Beatrix slumped down onto her back, all energy leaving her body. In almost no time at all her breathing slowed, and she disappeared into deep sleep.

Why did it feel like I was on the losing side right now?

Just because you didn’t *fail*, that didn’t mean you were doing the right thing... Her words were heavy. If I served the wrong ends, it didn’t matter how good a job I’d done—it wouldn’t be a success. I had no way of knowing for sure, but I imagined that was why these women had begun their dirty work.

“What a troubling character... I can’t tell if she’s incredibly bold or merely too obstinate for her own good,” Margit said.

“It’s fine. They aren’t causing a fuss now. Uzu went off to report our victory, so someone should be coming to pick them up soon enough.”

What came next wasn’t our job.

Right; I supposed it was time to draw back and get some sleep. I didn’t want to draw Kaya’s ire. I was too old to be lectured about how I needed to get my act together...

[Tips] Although the GM might spend nights drawing together the details of the world, it’s an unfortunate fact that they won’t be able to introduce all of these moving parts during the actual session.

After receiving a furious lecture from Kaya, I spent the next three days resting properly. I made sure not to do anything too taxing, but I drew on my mana to help speed up the healing process. It wasn’t all too fancy though—just pumping up my metabolism to let my body heal faster. There was a trait which allowed you to use mana to directly patch yourself up from within, but it cost a boatload of experience, so I had to make do with this slower method.

It was better than nothing, though, so I put in the effort to make a dent in my healing process. The salves for my face *hurt* and stank ten times worse than the stuff I used to relieve my stiff shoulders.

The eyedrops were a pain in and of themselves—like a dollop of wasabi rubbed straight into my cornea, stinging like nothing else and leaving my eye streaming tears for *hours*. It honestly was on par with the allergic reaction I'd had to the cursed cedar's pollen. But this stuff was purging Beatrix's lingering toxins, so again, I had to grin and bear it.

A final complaint—the medicines made my face crazy itchy all night. It was so distracting that I could barely sleep. In addition to the painful side effects from my recent bone fixing, I was starting to wonder if Kaya was leaving me to deal with all these side effects to make a point. Her logic probably went as follows: If healing was an easy and painless process, then people would throw themselves into danger over and over again, convinced that a potion could quickly and painlessly patch things up.

“Oh...? I can finally see again...”

I carefully removed the bandage around my eye—taking care not to touch the eyeball itself—and peered into my hand mirror. My sclera was still white like wax, but I could *see*. My vision was a little blurry, but I could write now, at least. I'd been writing up some reports with just my right eye to go on, but when I asked Margit to go over my draft—she was my go-to copy editor—her first comment was “Should this be slanting up so much?”

It was probably because I hadn't had much trouble grabbing things with one eye out of commission that I had assumed that my depth perception was totally fine too, yet it seemed that was far from the truth. I used a ruler to check and, lo and behold, it was swerving horrendously off course. I decided that any writing that needed to look neat would have to wait until I was better. I would be receiving an envoy from the Association soon; I was glad that I seemed to have recovered just in time.

Just as I was about to dip my quill in my inkpot, I felt a strange presence in my temporary room within the workshop.

I stood up and readied my fey knife, but all I got in response was a small sigh.

“You’re struggling to muster your usual charm. I expected better of our first late-night rendezvous in ages.”

“Miss Nakeisha!”

The sigh and the voice—with its uniquely muted touch—came from a familiar *sepa* clinging to the outside of the window frame, her face as rigid and passionless as a doll’s. What was my age-old nemesis from my days working undercover for the Empire doing kicking around in this sordid little burg? Sure, *Ende Erde* was still the Empire, but it was so remote that it felt more like a foreign country than home to many. She hadn’t even given me forewarning that she would be making a house call.

“It has been quite some time, Erich,” she said. “I would like to say that I am pleased to see you in good health, but...”

“Yes, with my face as it is, I would only take it as the most crass irony.”

“Indeed... Now, could you open the window? I have something I wish to discuss.”

After a few seconds of thought, I opened the window. Miss Nakeisha deftly slid her long body inside, without even touching the inner frame, before landing without a sound. She readjusted her posture before speaking once more.

“First, please take this. I am here today as an envoy from Marquis Donnersmarck.”

“An envoy? At this hour? I’m not sure envoys typically come in the dead of night.”

Miss Nakeisha revealed her four arms from the sleeves of her cloak. She first showed me her palms, then the backs of her hands, and then her palms once more. This was a display of trust practiced by those who walked on the darker side of life. I responded in kind and sent my *fey karambit* back into my sleeve with a twirl.



While it was true that we had fought to the near death on multiple occasions, when all of our exterior loyalties were off the table, she could be trusted. Her master, Marquis Donnersmarck, was quite the...*fickle* character. Even after Lady Agrippina had squashed him flat, he'd carried on undeterred with all his other irons in the fire. He had been an enemy, but often one we had little choice but to cooperate with. He couldn't be *relied* upon, but he could be trusted to a degree, or at least his treachery could be predicted within tolerable margins.

Or wait, maybe in this case it was Lady Agrippina who had been a little too accommodating. She had battled with the marquis over the succession of the Ubiorum county, but still she pounced upon his schemes with all the ease in the world if the scales tilted right.

And so we subordinates were stuck in a dizzying two-step—enemy to ally and back again, over and over...

Her three free palms still on display, she reached into her cloak with one arm and drew out a single letter. Upon the seal was Marquis Donnersmarck's crest: a sleeping lion, crowned.

"A request to take them in...?" I murmured.

The flowing script of the letter—so meticulous that most people unused to fancy penmanship wouldn't be able to read half of it—asked, in a measured tone that I was surprised to receive as a former enemy, if the five adventurers known as the One Cup Clan could be released into the care of Marquis Donnersmarck.

This wasn't just an independent request from Marquis Donnersmarck. Inside the envelope was another letter from Lady Maxine giving her own consent—from the penmanship and the clover-shaped seal, I had no doubt that it was hers. Letters could be faked, yes, but her personal quirks, from the sloping nature of her capital letters, to the spaces between words, indicated that she had penned this herself. It read, in short, that I was to accede to Marquis Donnersmarck, for the safety of all Marsheim.

His intentions were obvious. He wasn't looking to question them; he wanted to add them to his roster of flunkies.

“Do you know them?” I asked.

“Not me personally. My grandfather. And I wouldn’t call them so much acquaintances as...enemies.”

“How so?”

“They are the ones that killed my grandmother.”

Ooh-kay, that’s heavy. It wasn’t an uncommon occurrence in the world of assassins, but hearing about it firsthand was a positive downer.

“But that is in the past,” Miss Nakeisha went on. “Assassins and spies kill one another. Such is life. To bring one’s hatred outside the workplace will only shorten your own days.”

I really didn’t understand what made these professionals tick. I understood the responsibilities one had to one’s work, but to me revenge was either served immediately or doled out after careful planning. I couldn’t have the sort of compartmentalization skills to file away my emotions just because “that was work.”

Well, barring what feelings I had for the folks I’d killed for truly *egregious* mistakes.

Our approaches to life were completely different. Even if I understood the logic behind the words, I couldn’t get on board with it. It was terrifying to see just how different we were.

“There is suspicion that they were involved in certain affairs closer to the Empire’s center,” Miss Nakeisha said. “There wasn’t sufficient evidence, and the marquis quarreled with the Association in his attempt to obtain what information he could.”

“But now he has the moral right to inquire...”

“Indeed. He has made use of the commotion in Marsheim to air some of his complaints. By showing the Association manager, Lady Maxine Mia Rehmann, certain benefits she stands to gain, he has managed to secure their custody.”

Miss Nakeisha spoke as ever without moving her lips. It was impossible for me to gauge the true intentions that lay beneath her almost otherworldly beauty.

What I could surmise was that if Lady Maxine had given her consent, then Marquis Donnersmarck had most likely extended a helping hand in keeping public order in Ende Erde. It seemed like Lady Maxine had decided that, instead of doling out proper punishment, sweeping this matter under the rug had better long-term implications for Marsheim. This was the sort of cloak-and-dagger realpolitik that you wouldn't really see back on Earth. It was terrifying to consider what strings could be pulled, if the right person wished it. I wasn't sure of the extent of these assassins' crimes, but here they were being fobbed off to Marquis Donnersmarck because he said so. It was anything but legal.

"How will the handover take place?" I asked.

"Tomorrow a carriage from the Association will arrive to pick them up. However, there will be an unfortunate incident where they try to escape and are subsequently killed. Or so the story shall go. Do not worry. This will have no negative implications on you."

As soon as the assassins left our care, responsibility would shift from the Fellowship of the Blade to the Association. It seemed like they had all their ducks in a row.

Even if the One Cup Clan had been written off by Marsheim's adventuring community, it seemed that Marquis Donnersmarck had his own intentions. I had heard that after his beatdown from Lady Agrippina, he had lost a number of useful pawns, so it wasn't too big a leap of logic to imagine that he was looking for an immediate boost to his lineup.

In that case, I wondered why he needed to bother explaining all this to *me*. Nothing warranted the letter from Miss Nakeisha. As long as he got Lady Maxine's approval, then he could just stage a quick abduction when no one was looking and get away without anyone knowing that the One Cup Clan were under his jurisdiction.

"What's the marquis's plan here?" I asked.

"Who can tell? His plans are on a scale that someone like myself cannot comprehend. Need I remind you he is a methuselah?"

She had a point—it was difficult to empathize with someone who didn't work within the same kind of time limits us mortal folk did. While we could only focus

on what the next month would hold, people like him could prepare for events that were at least half a century away. He no doubt had to come up with all sorts of alien preoccupations to fill up his free time. Patience like his was beyond any mortal reckoning.

“What I *can* say is that he wishes to see things stabilize here in the west,” Miss Nakeisha said. “Did you know that Marquis Donnersmarck and Count Ubiorum had a tea party just the other day?”

“Yes, that does seem like he is rather serious.”

I couldn't even imagine what went through the head of any person who'd turn to their number one assassination target and ask, “Hey, wanna plan some evil together?” Not that I had any better idea what the deal was with anyone who could say *yes*...

“Now then, Erich. Marquis Donnersmarck has said that, if you so wish it, he will be happy to allow you to integrate the One Cup Clan under your personal control.”

“Huh?”

I couldn't stop the strange sound that escaped from my lips. What was she saying?

“The Fellowship of the Blade seems to be lacking in covert manpower. You may have one member who is rather capable, but I think her decision to focus her efforts on monitoring the One Cup Clan was what made it so easy for me to come right to your window. Don't you think with things as they are it will be a bit difficult to sleep soundly at night?”

It was as Miss Nakeisha said—Margit was focusing all her energy on keeping the One Cup Clan under her surveillance, and that meant our general guard was limited. Despite her expressionless face, Miss Nakeisha looked somewhat proud at having slipped past our perimeter. I had people on guard in rotating shifts, but they weren't the most skilled bunch of scouts I'd ever seen. It would be nigh impossible for them to spot Miss Nakeisha if she was doing her best to remain hidden.

As our organization got larger, it was getting more obvious that our clear-cut

frontline martial types had overshadowed what few assets we had in the realms of the arcane, divine, and shadowy.

I wondered just where she had tapped the intel on the size of our organization. Had there been a leak among Gerrit's father and his connections?

This was frustrating. I hated being counted as one of Marquis Donnersmarck's playing pieces. I didn't yet know why keeping things locked down out here would benefit him, but I knew for sure that despite his own twisted heart, he was a fair bit more reliable than the local power players, and he seemed to have the Empire's interests reasonably close to his heart.

I didn't know what Lady Agrippina found fun, but she had said that her dream wasn't to shake up the Imperial houses, so it was easy to conclude that whatever their plans were, they weren't fun.

"Isn't it an adventurer's job to help guide their companions back onto the proper path?" Miss Nakeisha said. "The marquis said as much."

Yes, I thought, that's correct, but this job is way too difficult!

We hadn't killed any of them, no, but we had left them with scars that they would bear for the rest of their lives. If I played my cards right I could indebted them to me and render them docile, but who knew when they would choose to turn on us?

What I valued most in this world was conviction. They had their own conviction, but I found it nigh on impossible to square with mine. If you asked me, it was far more frightening to leave all of our undercover work to folk you couldn't trust than to have nothing at all.

"I feel that it may be too much," I said. "I believe that, if the manager allows it, it would be best for the marquis to use them as he wishes."

"Is that right? I thought you might say as much."

As ever, Miss Nakeisha's eyebrows and mouth didn't move, but I could have sworn that for a moment she looked *relieved*.

I supposed it didn't matter all that much. Whether they received punishment at the hands of Lady Maxine, went under Marquis Donnersmarck's protection,

or worked under me, their past deeds wouldn't go away. Under the name of redemption and fate, I would let the One Cup Clan have some say in what they wanted out of their futures. If they hated their fates, they could choose to end their lives then and there; or they could choose to start again under new leadership. Looking at Miss Nakeisha and his other subordinates, Marquis Donnersmarck seemed to take care of his people.

“Now, I shall be taking my leave,” Miss Nakeisha said. “It brings me pleasure to see you looking so well.”

“And I you. I would have hated to find out you'd fallen to some *other* fool.”

“Like I said back then, we met in the shadows. Our next bout will come in time, I am sure. May our next battlefield be a grand one.”

As I watched her trail out of the small window like smoke, I took in a deep breath. I had been breathing lightly ever since she had come in, but now that I sensed she was gone I let my tension dissipate.

I had thought that I would never have anything to do with her again. It was quite the surprise for Marquis Donnersmarck to show interest in Ende Erde. I had thought that the roots of this plot had run deep, but *that* deep?

“I won't be getting much rest anytime soon...”

For a moment, it was like I was back in the office, getting the last bit of a big job in the can, only to turn and find a mountain of unread, urgent emails in my inbox. I'd only just begun to plumb beneath the troubled surface waters of my new home, it seemed.

I didn't regret my decision to stay, but I couldn't say I was enthused about my prospects. There wasn't much I could do but hone my edge and keep us all ready for the next fray.

I was seriously craving the kind of final boss we could put down and leave a neat bow on my campaign. As I sighed at my impossible dream, I sat back at my desk ready to complete my report.

[Tips] The curtains never drop on truly grand theaters of ambition just because a central player has been killed.

One Full Henderson

Ver0.9

1.0 Hendersons

A derailment significant enough to prevent the party from reaching the intended ending.

The tale that follows is not from the timeline we know—but it might have been, had the dice fallen differently...

One Full Henderson ver0.9

1.0 Hendersons

A derailment significant enough to prevent the party from reaching the intended ending.

No matter where you might find yourself in the world, there were always people eager to build elaborate private metrics for the objects of their fascinations. In a country to the far east, they took inspiration from the martial arts that made up part of their divine acts, and bestowed ranks to every delight under the sun—from which side dish would best suit their staple food of white rice, or who was the best looker in the town—and they found great joy in this pastime.

Rhine was no exception. People loved to discuss which food items paired best with their beloved black bread or oatmeal. The people of the Empire didn't limit this to just food either. Adventuring was a trade based around one's appearance, and so people enjoyed placing their favorites in their own personal beauty pageants.

"Well, look who it is," said one of the scribes posted by the job billboards at the Adventurer's Association in Marsheim, whose eyes had been on the door. Through it came a zentaur with a number of others in tow. She was a healthy, sun-kissed adventurer, and despite her missing left ear, her overflowing confidence sold the spitting image of a beautiful warrior.

"Whoa, quite the lineup today..." he went on.

Behind the zentaur was a group of women: a sharp-featured beauty in an evening dress and with a charming lily of the valley tattoo on her cheek, who glared about the room, probing every corner for danger; a kaggen, at once prim, poised, and plainly deadly; a hlessi, who, while not strictly "beautiful" by the standards of ordinary mensch, was undeniably *precious*; a huntsman

arachne with a veiled face and clothes that accentuated her sumptuous figure; and a dusky-skinned, bright-eyed vierman.

Trailing behind them, as if he were their ward, was a young blond-haired man with a fancy cloak slung over one shoulder. Upon his bare right shoulder, perched like a knapsack, was a smaller arachne with a youthful yet mature aura about her.

Perhaps it was somewhat unfair that over half of the unofficial top ten most beautiful lady adventurers of Marsheim all belonged to the same clan, but no one paid it much mind. After all, the adventurer standing in the midst of his parade was a sapphire-blue veteran. Not only was he the highest-ranked adventurer in all of Marsheim, he was a veritable hero, with many a great feat to his name.

His name was Erich of Konigstuhl. He had used his physical prowess to crush the conspirators behind the Marsheim Troubles, bested a true dragon despite the odds, and assembled the largest adventuring force in the Empire—over five hundred eager Fellows.

These days, the epithet he'd won for the lovely locks that had made noble daughters writhe with envy had fallen to the wayside. *Other* titles had taken its place. With all eyes upon him, he smiled awkwardly.

“Have we caused a bit too much of an issue, coming in such a large group?” Erich said.

With his fame for having the most beautiful party in all of Marsheim—two of whom were occupied today with other business—Erich's two epithets seemed more appropriate than ever in this moment. No one knew who had been the first to come up with them, but they had stuck: he was known as Philandering Erich, or in company more inclined toward polite euphemism, “Erich the Wolf.”

When these names had first started going around, he had fallen into a rage at their uncouthness and sought out the one at fault in hopes of dispensing his trademark vigilante justice. However, he had since accepted it; now he put on a cool expression that invited anyone to call him anything they wished. As his group approached the line for the reception desk, the crowd parted for him without a word.

“Pay me no mind,” Erich said. “There is no hierarchy in adventuring. A higher rank shouldn’t demand beneficial treatment.”

Erich gestured to his junior coworkers, but none dared to return to their original place in the line. Could anyone blame them? With seven jaw-dropping women—and one man who could easily pass as one with a little makeup—before them, everyone froze in place out of fear.

“Erich! It’s because you’re ganging up on the poor dears that they’re quaking in their boots!” Eve yelled from behind the reception desk. “Just come here and let’s get everything sorted in a jiffy. I don’t want work to pile up because you caused a commotion!”

“What a conundrum...” Erich muttered. “I hate pushing in line more than I hate the sort of folk who hawk their phlegm at the side of the road...”

Eve had been working at the Association for many years now, and so Erich decided that instead of drawing further ire from her, he would acquiesce to her demand. He walked up to the reception desk and drew a number of tokens from his pocket.

“From right to left we have the delivery of valuable goods for Mistilteinn trading, an etiquette tutor for Viscount Flein, routing of brigands from the pleasure district, settling bills with various chicken food stalls...”

The experienced receptionist deftly wrote down the numbers on Erich’s tokens before he had even finished talking and passed them on to her new colleague. Eve then set about filling in various other forms to get Erich’s payments sorted. Whereas tokens that proved that a job was successfully completed were usually made of cheap ceramic for lower-level jobs, some of the ones that Erich had drawn out were made of an arcane alloy—designed to prevent attempts at forgery. From the sums, it was highly likely that he wouldn’t be paid in cash, but in remunerative forms approved by the merchants’ artisan union.

“The Fellowship of the Blade sure have widened the breadth of their activities,” Eve said. “What have you been up to today?”

“Giving some personal training to Sir Eberstadt’s son,” Erich replied. “He’s still a bit on the lean side, but if he eats enough and gets some meat on his bones,

he'll make for a decent knight.”

“Diversification is all well and good, but I think people are forgetting what being a ‘fellow’ of the blade means, Erich.”

“It hurts a little to have that so smartly pointed out...” the legendary debaucher said as he scratched awkwardly at his scalp.

The Fellowship of the Blade had grown in scope since its initial founding, and it had invited swathes of people who seemed at odds with the clan’s name. With scouts, practitioners of magic and miracles, skilled professionals of all manner of crafts—ranging from those with an eye for antiques to those blessed with a broad historical knowledge—it seemed safe to throw any and all *specialized* requests at the Fellowship and their broad repertory.

This could be seen today with the stack of tokens that Erich had brought to the Association today on behalf of his clan. Less than half were more typical adventurer fare, such as protecting caravans or dealing with bandits, whereas the others were like Erich’s own personal job, which involved giving some private lessons to the eldest son of a knight’s family. This wasn’t the strangest of the bunch—one of the Fellowship with quite the literary background had been asked to help write some love letters.

Perhaps due to the fact that they had a team of talented people able to catch even the most difficult pitches, they inspired clients to directly come to them with heads bowed, begging them not to turn them down. With their immaculate track record, they had built up a reputation that had earned them the sort of jobs that warranted their multifarious expertise.

Of course, they still took on jobs that tested their prowess in battle, but the Fellowship of the Blade had since shed its reputation as a squadron of elite sword fighters and had taken on a position as an adventuring household that could take on all comers. In turn, true-blue adventuring jobs found their way to other clans.

One such example of this was just last season, where a drake had—gods knew why—swum down from the sea into one of Rhine’s biggest rivers; Clan Laurentius, not the Fellowship, had been tasked to dispose of it. Rumor had it that Erich was still bitter about it. In the apologetic words of the intermediary

client, “I thought you were too busy with your own specialized endeavors,” but Erich—slightly younger and less patient—had apparently grabbed them by the lapels and said, “That’s the kind of job I *want* you to give me!”

That wasn’t to say that the Fellowship didn’t receive its fair share of requests. Given the sheer number of women in their roster, as well as the prevalence of training in formal etiquette and palatial speech within the ranks, requests from nobles asking to escort their fairer folk came thick and fast. With the Fellowship taking on many of these jobs, many clients simply felt that it didn’t really make sense to them to ask the Fellowship to help cantons struggling with demibeasts or the ichor mazes that kept cropping up.

“Very good, all completed,” said Eve. “Your clients are all pretty satisfied too. Right, take this and trot along now. We can’t have the rookies shaking in their breeches all day.”

“Got it. There is something that’s been bugging me... I’ve always wanted to work out who it was who first started saying, ‘Hide away your party’s womenfolk, or Goldilocks will get ’em.’”

Erich tutted, but he only got a laugh from Eve in response. Some of the rookies who couldn’t stand her unwavering gaze knew the reason for her silence. Despite her sweet-looking appearance, Eve knew most of the rumors that went around adventurer circles, and it wasn’t difficult to imagine what would happen next if she spilled the beans. Of course, Erich wouldn’t do anything *violent* to whoever started the rumor, but no one dared risk another of his sermonizing struggle sessions over round after round of top-shelf booze.

Erich was starving for the kind of easy camaraderie he got from other guys his age, apparently. His comrade of many years, Siegfried, was busy with clan duties and new familial responsibilities, and so it was difficult to find a spare moment to relax and hang out. Erich took *any* excuse to grab Siegfried and treat him to a stiff drink yapping on all the while.

And so Eve played it cool, that she might protect the gaggle of newbie adventurers, and simply handed Erich a heavy bag of coins.

“Hey, Erich?” the zentaur said, coming up to Erich’s side. “Mind handing over today’s earnings? I’m feeling pretty parched, if you get me!” She opened up her

wallet, which was completely empty.

Dietrich had arrived one day out of the blue when the Fellowship of the Blade was becoming more well-known. Upon arriving in Marsheim, she had boldly announced that she wished to show Erich the fruits of her training before dragging him back home. Apparently she was an old friend of Erich's, but her bold request was crushed in an instant, and now she found herself a proper member of the Fellowship. No amount of teaching had managed to impart any amount of palatial speech or proper decorum, but she proved her fortitude as a living cannonball on the battlefield. Despite her years in the Fellowship, Dietrich evidently still had no qualms about begging her boss for money.

“Hey! You got paid by the caravan head yesterday. Remember? The one you helped guard?”

“Yeah, but I used it to pay off some debts... I got banned from the Snowy Silverwolf...”

The Fellowship of the Blade's strict policy laid out that their members were to be paid once every seven days. This was to help the newcomers learn proper money management before they spent every last coin in the tavern or pleasure district. It was meant to stop the Fellows from getting into debt, but some people were incapable of learning their lesson, apparently.

Each initiated member was assigned a minimum living wage, further gussied up proportional to the individual jobs they'd completed. As an aside, all records were viewable by everyone in the clan to encourage fairness. The result was that keen adventurers who managed to complete difficult, well-paying gigs got paid in kind.

Yet at copper-green rank, Dietrich was far from a rookie. Her constant debt was criminal.

Her last payday had only been four days ago. Dietrich had just returned from out of town on a long-term bodyguard mission, and so a hefty four drachmae pay slip was waiting for her, so how had she managed to eat through what amounted to a farming family's entire disposable income so quickly?

“C'mon, Chief! I'll work it off, okay?”

Dietrich had put a hefty arm around Erich and was about to peel the coins from him when a hand put an end to the charade.

“Yeow!”

Just as her arm had made contact with Erich, her shapely nose was struck. It must have been quite the shock; tears sprung to her eyes and she began to flush red. Zentaurs were known for their short tempers, but Dietrich’s expression changed as she saw what was held in the hand that had struck her. It was a large silver piece. It had made an ominous sound as its high-quality metal scraped along its fellows in the bag.

It was the sharp-featured woman who had put Dietrich in her place after attempting to use her womanly charms to have her way with Erich.

“Do not trouble him too much, Dietrich,” Beatrix said. “It isn’t wise to act so illogically toward your own leader. Use this to sate your cravings.”

“Seriously...?”

Dietrich was disappointed, but grabbed the coin nonetheless. After a moment of thought, she examined both sides closely.

“Fine, fine... Guess I’ll make do with this today, then...”

All Dietrich got in return was the stern stare of the Emperor of the Eastern Conquest. The silver quality was good, so it was probably worth thirty librae, but it seemed that Dietrich was disappointed by something other than the amount. She let out a deep sigh before walking off into the night.

“Beatrix, don’t be too soft on her,” Erich said. “With that much, she’ll buy decent booze and before you know it she’ll have wandered back tomorrow morning with more debt.”

Despite Erich’s firm stare, Beatrix took it coolly. She leaned upon her leader’s shoulder—Erich still hadn’t grown, despite reaching adulthood, and stood a full head lower thanks to Beatrix’s high-heeled boots—and slipped in close with all the ease in the world.

“I could see the trouble lining your face. It’s a cheap price to pay for her to quietly enjoy a few drinks out of the way, no?”

“I would hesitate to call a newbie’s monthly wage cheap,” Margit chimed in with an exasperated expression. Just as the former assassin had interrupted Dietrich’s ploys, so, too, was she interrupted. Margit, still perched atop Erich’s shoulder, had grabbed Beatrix’s headdress—she thought Beatrix was too old to wear such a gaudy thing—and yanked her head toward her.

“Ngh, please, leave my hair, Margit!” Beatrix said. “I was merely lending a hand to my leader, to whom I owe an incredible debt.”

“It seemed to me like you were lending more than just a hand.”

Despite Margit’s steely gaze, Beatrix didn’t blanch. With an agility that seemed impossible for the thick boots she wore, she drew back, pulled something from her pocket and tossed it at Margit. It was a black die.

“Hey! That’s mine!”

This gambler’s friend, imbued with freedom from fate itself, was carved from buffalo horn. It was smooth, possibly from much use, and a beloved possession of Primanne’s. She often tossed it about in her small, three-fingered hands. Who could say when Beatrix had got ahold of it.

“Sisker, that’s nok nice!” Primanne said.

“This is merely a display of your immaturity,” Beatrix said, pointedly. “Have your wits been dulled since you glued yourself to Erich’s side?”

In the face of Beatrix’s grin, Primanne could only gnash her jaws in rage. The kaggen was physically tough, and so she often accompanied Erich on jobs to keep him safe. She wasn’t just a good bodyguard; she was a skilled scout too. To top it off, she could fly short distances, which earned her some missions only she could manage. As a result, her combat skills had suffered somewhat.

“We’re going to use this to decide things. We’re a bigger group than usual. How long has it been since we were all together?”

The dice rattled with a charming sound and were divvied out to everyone in the group but Erich.

With more leadership roles on par with clan heads, the Fellowship was a lot busier than before. They had a reputation for taking on a whole range of gigs

and were running thin on the ground to get everything done. It had been more than a whole season since the officers were last gathered together.

“B-Bea... I’m ’ine...”

“Yes, I also. Sheikh, one half a year since you last came to Marsheim, no?”

“What’s with that expression? Ahh, I see. With your jobs in Marsheim, you’ve been enjoying yourselves more than enough. I see, I see...”

The hlessi and the vierman turned down the die, but it came out of respect for their leader, with whom they had shared a cup with and had vowed to share in their destinies. Beatrix had taken on very particular jobs, and so she had been working solo far from Marsheim. It had been two seasons since she had last seen Erich. Neither of them wished to butt in on this long-awaited reunion.

“I understand, but we’ve got to follow protocol. Otherwise it isn’t fair. Am I right?” Beatrix said.

“Very well,” Margit said to Beatrix’s teasing statement. Margit sighed, but the smile playing on her lips indicated that she didn’t mind too much. After all, if things went well, the responsibilities of the night to come could be shared.

“Um... Do I have a say in this?” Erich said, raising his hand. Such behavior in public did nothing to quash the rumors about his less-than-savory epithets. Of course, none of them had said anything direct, so he had no leg to stand on when it came to airing his grievances, but it wasn’t rare for complaints to come from the manager herself. Though they never came in person—only in formal, wax-sealed letters.

“Main’s afraid not, Erich. Tum should know that once ham’s leader is like this, there’s no talking vah out of it. Main thinks playing along is to tum’s benefit,” Main said.

Erich’s whispered complaint was shot down by the largest and youngest member of the group. Main gelled well with Beatrix on the battlefield and understood too well how her mind worked. She knew that Beatrix enjoyed seeing men squirm.

“Very good,” Beatrix said. “We shall all cast our dice at the same time. Erich, your hands. Yes, like that. Whoever has the most pips shall win.”

“Fine, fine,” Erich said. “Just get it over with.”

Realizing nothing would come of refusing them, Erich opened his hands to receive the six dice that came clattering his way. However, the man famed for his wolfish appetites couldn't help but widen his eyes at the three pairs of red snake eyes looking back at him.

[Tips] Erich the Wolf or Philandering Erich came into his epithets around the time that the Fellowship of the Blade attained a sudden substantial boost in public recognition, as well as five gorgeous new members. The names continued to stick as the public coveted his ever-youthful looks despite the passage of years.

Many in Marsheim have received complaints from his comrade Siegfried, who often commented, “That guy’s room is filled to the rafters with perfumes! I swear, it’s like a cathouse in there...”

The creaking of a bed; endless, high-pitched moans; the sticky sound of bodies intertwined. Until just a moment ago, the musk of sweat and body fluids had filled the room, compelling those within to revert back to their basest drives.

As I basked in the afterglow of it all, I took a drag on my pipe.

“Wh-Whew...”

Even as I expelled the smoke, the sweet mix of herbs couldn't overpower the sweet memories of six hours of lovemaking.

“Mm... Erich...”

As I placed my hand upon the hand that clasped at my waist, Margit shot me a bewitching smile.

Despite being close to thirty now, her looks hadn't changed in the slightest. With large rose-and cobweb-style tattoos on her back and a dancing butterfly tattoo on her waist, she had gotten even more enchanting.

Her pale skin was still flushed pink. The faint outlines of her veins activated

neural clusters buried deep in my lizard brain. Her body still quivered, as if she still craved more pleasure. I couldn't help but smile at her. I drew her up onto my lap.

"You sure did work hard," she said.

"I guess," I replied. "But I've gotten older. I'm a bit spent, if I'm honest."

No matter how old I got, I loved this part—not the chase after higher heights, but basking in the lingering heat of all that passion. It lasted longer than the joy of the sex itself.

"Well, that's not surprising anyone. You had six women to please, after all."

But when Margit said something like that, I struggled to find the right way to reply. I let out a noncommittal sound and looked away. Sadly, I'd find no respite looking elsewhere. What waited for me there was a sight almost too grand for mortal eyes: skin in the colors of deep honey and fresh snow; sleek brown fur; gleaming green chitin. Here lay a collection of beauties, still entwined in their exhausted slumber.

The past six hours had left me so dazed that I found myself needing to stop and remind myself what had put me here. It was probably...when I decided that I wanted to help save the One Cup Clan.

I had questioned them and unraveled their reasons for straying from the path of an upright adventurer. I was moved; I couldn't sit idly by. Yes, they'd willfully trapped themselves in a death spiral of vengeance without end, but their *motives* were sound. They stood as a living example of how one could do nothing wrong and still face grievous failure.

I didn't intend to put on a front and say that I knew revenge was a hopelessly fickle master, or to lecture them about the endless cycle of violence. I simply hadn't yet come to know their brand of despair; I had never lost anyone quite so dear to me.

Even if I couldn't empathize with their situation, I could sympathize well enough. They had formed close bonds, lost those allies, sought revenge, made new bonds, lost those allies again, and on it went. Some might slander this process as an utterly pointless venture, but I could see the gruesome logic

behind it. If I had lost Margit, Siegfried, and Kaya back in the cursed cedar expedition, I might have found myself in exactly the same position.

Despair made profits and logic lose all meaning. It mired you, stuck with you despite everything you tried, and could only be sublimated by cutting it off at the source.

Even if you just lived a normal life, you would continue to lose and to gain. That was just the volatile nature of life's great drama. Debts came and went without end. Any fool could look back and churn out endless regrets or curse the script they were made to work with.

Beatrix hadn't been begging for her life; her words had simply poured out from the smallest of holes in her armor. For once, she'd been on the losing side of a life-and-death struggle. Unable to bear the weight any longer, she had asked me, "Where had I gone wrong?" with all the airs of a partner at the end of an ehrengarde match.

Any other day, I would have left her question unanswered. But there she was, at the end of her rope, and all I could think was *How much difference is there between her and me, really?*

So when Nakeisha asked if I'd mind taking care of the One Cup Clan, it only took the faintest of pressures to say yes. If not for that, nothing else would have played out the way it had. Back then, although I had acknowledged their original motives, I couldn't fully accept all that they had done, and so I'd construed the new position I gave them as some kind of penance—as long as they were on board with it, of course. They had reason for their actions, but their revenge *had* legitimately pushed them off the right path. I couldn't just let them go free, but I thought that they could help handle Marsheim's future struggles. That had been the last little bit of motivation I needed to play along with Donnersmarck and bring them into the fold.

It had been like pushing a cart with four square wheels, but looking back now, I'd made the right decision—or at least hadn't made the *wrong* one.

Our manpower had shot up, and that went extra for intel and reconnaissance work. We'd nipped countless plots against Ende Erde that fell outside of Margrave Marsheim's jurisdiction in the bud, rescuing many a canton from fiery

ends. Without these successes, I think that Mister Fidelio—who had been *incandescent* about me recruiting major players in the Kykeon plot—wouldn't have forgiven me.

Yes, my motives had been a bit sentimental, but my decision served a pragmatic purpose too. Marquis Donnersmarck had eyes on Ende Erde and had been eager to refresh his power base by recruiting the One Cup Clan, but I didn't think they had a good future with him. I figured things would work out best if they spent their energies setting matters right in Marsheim. Of course, they'd never fully pay their penance, but I was certain that this was their best way forward.

I knew I was going to get chewed out for it, but when I went to report my decision to Mister Fidelio I thought I was going to die.

“You're deciding...to save these villains...*purely* out of your own softhearted inclinations?”

Each word came through gritted teeth. I swear staring down the throat of a dragon while it was winding up to use its breath weapon would have been less terrifying. I had used every gift of gab I had to squeeze a tiny nail, no, a *wooden skewer* between the rope and my neck just to keep myself from suffocating.

I had been banned from returning to the Snoozing Kitten for a while. I didn't get to see Mister Fidelio's child—though I was totally to blame for that—and my relationship with Siegfried suffered somewhat. My comrade was an honest lad. He was willing to see the gray side of things, but in the grand selection of tough pills to swallow, I'd presented him with one wrapped in barbed wire and washed down with sewage; I couldn't blame him for hesitating.

Most surprising of all had been Schnee—the one of us who had been closest to death. She just sort of rolled with it. She didn't break her impenetrable smile and mingled with the One Cup Clan before walking off, apparently satisfied. She still supplied me with decent intel, and it seemed like she was on good terms with Beatrix. I supposed that Schnee was the sort of character who would use *any* measure if it were to Marsheim's benefit.

And so we were led to today.

Marsheim had seen a tumultuous revolt that had cost scores of lives. Any

explanation would seem over-the-top. Of the easy dozen plots we had crushed thus far, some had been so wide-reaching that not even Ende Erde, not even the whole Empire, but even our satellite states would have perished.

In hindsight they truly were bloody battlefields. The struggle had driven me past my limits to greater strength, but I had enough head-spinning memories from countless sessions to fill my record sheet enough to do it all again. I'd lost count of how many times I'd found myself at death's door. Thanks to modern healing magic I'd lost more limbs than most people have had in their whole lives.

A lot of things might have turned out better if I hadn't taken on the One Cup Clan, but here I was, alive and well in my late twenties and still adventuring...well, maybe not the perfect definition of adventuring, but better to be alive and able to complain than not.

Unfortunately, despite all our hard work and everywhere it had taken us, we'd still failed to follow the thread to the end of this conflict. But frankly, given that the whole stupid situation had put me in bed with these six women day after day, maybe I'm fine with that.

To set the record straight, I wasn't the one who made the first moves, and I was fully aware that doing so would be wrong. It had been Beatrix who had first approached me—as one of the few people I trusted as implicitly as Margit. The tipping point for the whole mess came when I was nineteen.

It remains the busiest year of my life thus far. My brain was absolute mush trying to keep up with everything that was going down and staying on top of the ongoing geopolitical boondoggle. I still don't think I've finished processing it, but I can say with some confidence that it was the second-worst moment of my life. An old friend had dropped back into my life, conspiracies had been coming to a head left right and center, and I hadn't *quite* been nostalgic for my workload from my days as Lady Agrippina's steward, but it was *close*.

There'd been a ten-day stretch where I nearly died on seven separate occasions, and all that compounded lingering fight-or-flight had kinda worn Margit out. You know how it is; nothing puts you in the mood quite like finding out you're still in one piece when you expected otherwise, if for no other

reason than to satisfy the old hard-coded Darwinian imperatives. So yeah—I ended up sleeping with someone besides Margit for the first time about then. Three guesses who, and the first two don't count.

“You're thinking of another woman while I'm sitting right here on your lap, aren't you?” Margit said.

It seemed like my partner had realized my thoughts had been drifting to the woman with a skeletal saint on her back, still trembling in her sleep with the lingering waves of our lovemaking. She grabbed my chin and lifted my head to leave a kiss upon my neck.

“Sorry, Margit,” I said. “It wasn't anything lascivious. More...retracing my steps. Trying to remember how I got here.”

“Well, you *are* an incorrigible skirt chaser, aren't you?”

“Lies. Lies and slander, and I'd say so every time if I could.”

I felt a soft and gentle kiss, more a peck really, once our pillow talk trailed off. The brush of her tongue upon my lips felt nice, but I was shook by the reaffirmation that she knew all of my weak points.

Margit drew me back into the huge bed—a monstrous piece of furniture, built to endure the lot of us pushing ourselves to our physical limits—and I felt something soft enfold my head. With it, my pleasant exhaustion blossomed into a desire for deeper slumber.

I felt all the elaborate inner workings of my mind slow and sputter, all thoughts of my troubled past pushed aside as this pleasant feeling dragged my consciousness under the surface.

I could tell I'd gotten close to something important for a moment, but the realization was no match for my fatigue. If I were in any danger, I could survive on catnaps for days without complaint, forcing myself to think and act like a human-slaughtering machine.

But here, wrapped in the softness of women's flesh and the easy breathing of valiant warriors, there was no hope of resistance. I was ready to go out like a light.

Margit chuckled. “Sleepy, are you? Well, tomorrow is a day off, so sleep as long as you wish.”

“Right... Yeah... Tomorrow’s...day off...”

Arachne ran cooler than us mensch on average, but it was still pleasant to feel her body heat around my head. Drawn in by her warmth, I felt my eyelids droop. Every time I breathed in, I took in her body odor and her perfume, eroding my last vestiges of caution.

Ahh, this isn't good, I thought, this will slow me down...if anything happens...

All the situational awareness that had saved my bacon all this time was worthless here and now. It was dangerous to fall into deep, defenseless, childlike sleep, but my partner was here, so maybe I could just accept her kindness and drift off...

[Tips] The Fellowship of the Blade’s glories are widely known, but since the unrest in Marsheim, perhaps due to their diversification, many have stopped regarding them as a clan of adventurers.

After her partner’s breathing drifted into the soundless rhythm of sleep, Margit finally stopped her gentle caressing of Erich’s head. She carefully got up, so as not to even rustle the sheets, and was about to head off from the bed to clean herself of the greedy passions of hours past when a hand emerged in the corner of her vision.

“Is he asleep?” Beatrix asked.

The arm was a magical prosthetic, drawing its motive power from a magic gem fitted within. It had been Beatrix’s companion for nearly a decade since losing her right hand for good. It had cost her none of her grace; she handed over a cloth to the arachne with all the ease in the world.

The other four were still too deep in their abyss of pleasure to move, but Beatrix was merely relaxed and alert. It was all out of concern for the huntress, who was currently wiping Goldilocks’s brow.



“Yes, fast asleep,” Margit replied. “The first time he’s been this far under in a week.”

“I see. It is difficult to sleep when you are alone.”

In addition to the skull and skeletal saint upon her alabaster skin, she had a new tattoo below her stomach of a sword surrounded by fangs. Despite the sweat enveloping her, she also tended to Goldilocks as he snoozed. As Beatrix was about to fix his tousled hair, she felt a slap strike her prosthetic.

“So you still won’t let me fix his hair,” Beatrix said.

“Indeed. That’s a pleasure for me alone.”

Margit undid Erich’s hair, careful not to get it caught between her body and the bed. It had been tied up tightly in preparation for their festivities, but now it was running free. It was Margit’s special right to brush the hair that now reached past Erich’s waist.

“But how did things end up like this, he asks,” Beatrix said. “It seems like he’s the only one who doesn’t know.”

The former assassin gave a smirk as she pulled a blanket across her master, fully aware that he was built of strong enough stuff to never catch a cold anyway. Now that he’d been wiped clean of sweat, it would be easier to sleep with a blanket, given that he couldn’t be forced into clothes at this phase.

“Even though he’s pushed into such a corner that he cannot sleep without a ‘shield’ at his side, he’s still convinced everything is fine. His obstinacy is quite something,” Margit said.

Margit’s thoughts turned to her certitude that she would take the true origins of their arrangement to the grave.

Over the years, Erich hadn’t simply dove into battles that put his life on the line. No, he positively *drowned himself* in his work for days on end. And in return, threats on his life came from every angle—wars of spycraft, social squabbles, literal deathmatches. It didn’t take a genius to realize that while the Fellowship changed gears to focus its efforts on espionage and counterinsurgency, Erich’s chosen foes had given as good as they’d got.

The gauntlet he'd been put through—the times he'd only held on to life thanks to Kaya's bleeding-edge curatives, and when the whole world seemed to rest on his shoulders—had fundamentally broken this man.

His brain had responded to constant danger by locking into a heightened state. He'd become a better adventurer by leaps and bounds, but under that unyielding strain, he'd developed mental scars of a sort no one could avoid. As his Fellows learned of their boss's withering mental state, they murmured among themselves, "He's like a naked blade."

Although Erich himself might have tried to act as if everything were normal, he had suffered incredible damage without even knowing it. The paranoia came first. Any job that came his way invited monstrous scrutiny. He asked for endless checks on clients, to the point that it troubled even Schnee. Whereas a village head from a canton in trouble might have received an instant "I'm on my way" from Erich in the past, now they would send panicked follow-up requests which were all put on the backburner.

His appetite suffered next. Having almost died from being secretly slipped poison, he would almost exclusively eat food he caught and prepared himself. If he did eat food prepared by someone else, then he would subject it to a battery of spells to make sure it was safe as he slowly got through it bite by painstaking bite. The sight of his fearful frame as he ate was painful for those close to him to look at.

Sleep became a shallow thing. When he was out on the road, he would wake himself up with the sound of his own body tossing and turning. Always on edge, dark circles formed under his eyes. Although he never took out his frustrations on anyone else, his strategies became ever more brutal, ever more callous. Watching him change, Margit grew increasingly concerned.

Although Erich had improved as a swordsman and as an adventurer, sooner or later he would reach his limits as a human being. Despite knowing this, Margit could do little on her own. Erich might sleep soundly if she cared for him and held him, but it was completely impractical for her to always be there, alert and by his side. Arachne could get by on naps alone, but she was only one person. There were adventuring jobs that only she could do, so it was impossible for her to be by his side at all times. Even his lovemaking grew so

desperate that she couldn't exactly remember everything that happened during.

And so she came upon a plan. It wasn't one she liked. If Erich knew her true intentions, then he would almost definitely be furious. All the same, Margit wished to protect Erich's humanity. She didn't want him to lose sight of that overwhelming desire to become an adventurer; she didn't want him to forget the joy of adventuring he had with all of his Fellows.

"But he's lost much of the tumult in his heart," Beatrix said. "When I first tended to him, he wouldn't fall into a deep sleep even when I held him."

"I think things have calmed down, but I also think that he's grown used to it."

Erich had subconsciously separated Margit from the other women in his life. She was his other half, and so if he knew that she was there watching over him, then he could finally rest his weary bones. It was a trust stronger than the kind between mother and child. However, with only one "bed" where he could rest, he couldn't get the sleep he needed with any consistency. The sheets needed washing, the covers needed changing. If Margit shouldered the burden any longer, then she would break first.

Margit thought to increase the number of "beds" and "shields" in the bedroom. She had swallowed her pride and balanced the joy of being the only one Erich loved against that same man's own humanity.

When she had asked Beatrix, "Would you die for Erich?" the former assassin had nodded her head without much thought.

Beatrix felt some responsibility. Through taking them on, he'd taken on a double helping of dark affairs. It troubled her. She bore some responsibility to assuage some of the pain in Erich's soul. However, it wasn't just obligation that had led Beatrix into the bedroom. The Fellowship of the Blade had become a place where they could finally relax after so many years.

Erich trusted them and had welcomed them in as his allies, relying upon them and giving them important jobs. The knowledge that you had someone's back and they had yours on the battlefield was incredibly satisfying. Nothing was more reassuring than the relief she felt out there. It was like nothing she had felt before.

To top it all off, he had made a promise. If it were achievable without any regret, then their quest for retribution would go on.

Erich had accepted the One Cup Clan and their values *together*. It was nothing more than pure emotion that had moved Beatrix to realize that she would die for this man—even without her need for revenge to justify it.

They'd brought in the rest of the One Cup Clan to wear down his walls and draw him closer to a place where he could finally relax. They would take turns in small numbers, in their sympathy for the scout's plan—well, some were in it largely for their own perks—and joined him in the bedroom. It was a difficult strategy to rewrite his base instincts to make him realize that he could trust and sleep soundly around these women.

It took ten bouts in the boudoir before Beatrix finally heard Erich's gentle breathing. Coincidentally, this had been when Erich had finally learned the level of care it would take to not overdo it with his new partners. Beatrix could still remember the joy she felt when Erich stayed asleep even when Primanne, who had come to see if everything was all right, opened the door. Her heart had shook with the fact that they could support him too now.

Thanks to these women sanding away the thorns of his prickly heart, Erich had taken on two unsavory epithets. They felt sorry for that, but all the same they still felt joy for him.

But that was why...

"But today was quite something," Beatrix said. "To be honest, I don't think I'll ever stop feeling that utter, body-numbing pleasure in my stomach. Hell, I think Erich has memorized my weakest spots; it feels even *better* each time. I recall an interrogation session with a mage with a perverse streak and a fondness for sensation-magnifying potions... It still just doesn't measure up to what we've got..."

"Yes, and Erich never leaves us 'defeated' either."

As the years went by, Erich's lust had not ebbed in the least. Yes, he was a wolf in the bedroom, but he was at least a *gentlemanly* one—the sort of beast who seemed to gain pleasure from seeing his partner in the height of her own pleasure. He preferred play that sought to maintain that climax, and so he

pointedly refused that final push that would send them over the edge until the last possible moment.

The One Cup Clan were not unfamiliar with honeypot ploys in their past line of work, and so they'd taken up their task with optimism in their hearts, but it didn't take long in the bedroom for them to realize how badly they'd bitten off more than they could chew. If they didn't go into it with the same fervor as they brought to the battlefield, they wouldn't be able to sate and comfort Erich. They would reach their ends with the sublimation of their own pleasures before his.

Indeed, the proof was in the fact that Erich himself had noticed that maybe he was overdoing it and dialed back his approach. In all honesty, he had noticed far too late that they were struggling in the throes of their bliss. Goldilocks wasn't blameless in his ignorance.

"I think it's worth putting in all the effort in the bedroom if we're rewarded with his peaceful face. He's got a sort of cherubic quality."

"Agreed..."

A finger of Beatrix's prosthetic traced Erich's cheek, and he drew into her, his mouth still hanging slightly open as he slept. As she tucked her hand around his head, he nuzzled his face into her hands. Like a kitten at rest, the peaceful sight left Beatrix's with a warm, fuzzy feeling. In the past, any fingers upon his head would have sent Erich into a hyperventilating fit, and he would have woken up ahead of any further contact.

The beatific expression on his face was as sweet as dew for those who knew him when he was at his most difficult.

"But the rest of you are shameful," Beatrix said. "Can't at least one of you manage to see this through and guide him to sleep?"

"S-Sisker, you were the *tik* lask one, so you had some leeway," Primanne said.

"Yes, don't try to hide vah," Main said. "Main saw tum's eyes rolled back and tongue lolling out in pleasure."

"All strength in waist...gone..." Shahrnaz muttered. "No good... Lepsia still fainting."

Fate had played quite a trick to lead the six of them to share the bed with him together today. Perhaps the Philanderer had misjudged his skills in his state of shock. The four members of the One Cup Clan who were still conscious could answer Beatrix's call, but they couldn't move. Despite cloths being thrown their ways, none could muster the strength to wipe themselves down.

For Margit, who had once taken on all of this herself, this distribution of Erich's lust had brought the experience down to quite the pleasant intensity.

However, there was one more reason why Margit had called in their aid.

"By the way, Beatrix," she said, "there is something I need to tell you."

"Yes? What is it?"

"I don't think I will be able to join these late-night sessions for a while."

"Why not? You didn't get scratched or something, did you?"

Despite the years, Margit still hadn't lost her pure maiden's heart that preferred not to call a spade a spade. She flushed slightly and pointed to her stomach with a sigh. Her period was late.

"Hmm?" Beatrix said. "I thought arachne laid eggs, no?"

"When carrying the child of a mensch, sometimes the egg continues to grow inside," Margit said. "It makes the birth a little trickier. I can't say for certain, but the odds are good."

Although arachne copulated like other humanfolk, the way that their children were born was different. Their womb itself became an egg, which would then be laid. The fetus would grow inside the egg until it was ready to hatch. However, this only applied to full-blooded arachne children. In the case of a mensch father, the child usually took the mother's race, but in some rare cases it came out a mensch.

It was rare, and so Margit only really knew about it in passing. She had never thought it would happen to her. That was probably why it took her longer to notice the changes happening in her body.

"Things have been a bit easier recently, so I suppose I lost track," Margit said. "But I was thinking I would like to have my own children around now."

“That’s great. I’m pleased for you,” Beatrix said. “This was half the reason you drafted us, wasn’t it?”

Margit could only give a mischievous smile in response.

She had indeed devised the whole group partnership in part so she and Erich could raise a child without much worry. If Margit was the only one comforting the weary adventurer, then she would never have found the leeway to even think about a child. If her future children in this scenario had been arachne—jumping spider arachne tended to brood over their eggs—then she wouldn’t have been able to care for them while also securing Erich’s peaceful rest.

That said nothing of the utter fear she felt thinking of Erich during his more violent, short-tempered days. With a child, Erich would have gotten more ruthless than ever. He would have crushed any trace of evil that he could, all for the safety of his child’s future. A mountain of corpses and unnecessary grudges would have awaited them.

Having weighed the possibility of such a future, Margit had decided that Erich’s mental composure absolutely had to come first. She had held on fast to her maiden’s heart with its ideals of love, but she’d decided that she needed to make a compromise. That was where the One Cup Clan had come in.

The vision of herself holding the child of her dear partner was just too beautiful to cast aside.

“This will probably mean that your burden will increase,” Margit said to the others. “He will no doubt be ecstatic about the news, so please do your best to rein him in.”

“You’re quite right... I can see him picking a fight with the meanest clan in town just to clean things up a little. That would be poor form.”

Beatrix clapped a hand to her forehead as she imagined a future as troublesome as Margit had. This was his first child. Erich would be on cloud nine getting baby clothes, wondering what the best name would be, and, naturally, making sure his child would be able to grow up in a safe environment.

“But a child, hmm,” Beatrix went on. “I’m almost too old to be able to have one of my own. I *would* like one...”

“That would be quite the struggle for everyone else. Mensch have long gestation and weaning periods. If two of us are absent, the others will definitely be in trouble.”

“Hey, Sisker?” Primanne said. “Please consider *tik* things for a bik... We’re doing our besk, buk...”

“I am not having confidence to take on alone... Although wishing I could,” Shahrnaz said.

Losing their two heaviest hitters at the same time struck fear into their hearts. It was true that Beatrix was older than the rest, but her own magical reinforcements had extended her fertility. They wanted her to show a *little* restraint and at least wait until Margit was back in action.

Beatrix had cast contraceptive spells today, but her eyes were different as she looked at Margit tenderly stroking her stomach. They begged their leader to at least *think* about scheduling.

“Main is a bit more concerned about all these half-siblings and ve’s different mothers,” Main said.

“That’s nothing to worry about,” Margit said. “They can be the children of the Fellowship, just like Siegfried’s.”

If they all continued to have children with Erich, it would be quite the unique family from the kids’ perspective. The ever-coolheaded Main was somewhat concerned.

Siegfried’s twins—almost five now—were raised around the whole Fellowship. However, Siegfried didn’t have any other lovers—just Kaya. His situation was completely different from Erich’s. Not only that, whether Margit gave birth to a girl or a boy, how would the child act in the face of the half dozen women who acted like their father’s wife? If they didn’t treat this future child with some care, they could grow up with quite the twisted childhood. Any spawn they ended up producing would need a happy, stable home life that wouldn’t alienate them from society.

“Ahh, yes, Sieg,” Beatrix said. “If I recall he was so busy with his work as second-in-command that when his son could finally talk he ended up calling

Etan 'vater.' You could see Sieg's legs turn to jelly, seeing all that! Could you manage if something similar happened to you, Margit? If I or someone else were called 'mutter' in your place?"

"I am remembering..." Shahrnaz said. "Very poor man."

"Main thinks Main wouldn't be able to recover. Main feels sick just thinking about it..."

If they wished to remain Marsheim's top adventurers, that would naturally mean leaving the city. Less time would be spent with their children. And just like what happened to Siegfried, the symbolic moment of all their efforts—their child calling their name—would be lost.

When this happened to Siegfried, he had fallen into a terrible depression. It had taken Erich's encouragement and five bottles of decent wine for him to recover. The wound still ran deep. He had acted completely out of character and commissioned a miniature portrait that he could take when he was out on the road so he could remember their faces at any time.

Despite it all, Margit kept an easy smile on her face.

"It's mine and Erich's child," she said. "No matter how many mothers they may have, they will receive all the love sent their way and grow into a true monster. That would satisfy me well enough."

The One Cup Clan, who had seen real hell countless times, could not help but blanch in the face of Margit's terrifying aura. *What terrifying things she thought up!* Margit was the sort to teach her child every last thing there was to teach.

Margit would only use their bevy of mothers and siblings as fuel to raise her child into an utter beast. It might result in some headaches on Erich's part, but that was an acceptable loss considering the future of her first child.

Even after the huntress had laid her claws upon the prey she truly desired, she still was not satisfied. She wanted to create something she couldn't consume.

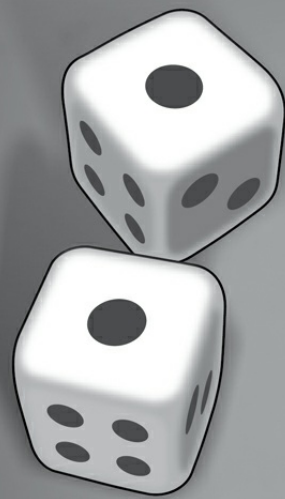
Yes, there was no chance their child would remain in the shackles of normalcy. With sword training from his father, hunting lessons from his mother, the love from all the adventurers under their beloved leader, and the unique

environment of the Fellowship of the Blade, it would make for an upbringing of a kind the world would likely never see again.

Even here there were six skilled warriors, each professionals in their own crafts. They would give their own love and their own lessons too.

As the women imagined the unknown child in Margit's womb and the terrifying creature it might become, they all shivered with a chill that didn't come from their naked bodies...

[Tips] When mensch men breed with other races, the child usually takes after the mother. However, there are rare cases where a mensch child will be born. In this case, the mother's body undergoes a few changes to compensate. Perhaps due to this, folk rumors abound that the child will be incredibly gifted.



Afterword

I would like to thank my grandmother for always watching over this series. I miss you.

Now then, this is my eleventh Western-style afterword. I would like to take this opportunity to once more apologize to my editor for vastly missing the deadline, to Lansane for my late replies and wordy, fussy requests despite handing in the manuscript barely in time—to the point I'm still doing so as I write this afterword—and to everyone involved for my tardiness. I've almost run out of fingers to lop off out of penance at this point.

Finally, I would like to apologize to my dear readers with whom I am so lucky to share a table for my slow writing and the delay with this story and its two-volume format. It is thanks to your support that I have managed to publish this volume. OVERLAP, Inc. and I have quite the powerful Bond. I am fully aware that a writer who writes so many words and at such a slow pace is in danger of breaking these Bonds, so I can only apologize. I would like to thank everyone who helped me throughout this process and my loyal readers for your support.

I'm still a bit surprised things ended up this way. When I had written Canto I with its ninety-five percent original story, I had sent a curse tunneling back through time to my past self for not keeping things more in check, but here we are regardless. I'm writing up the afterword of Canto II with the realization that there's no way things will progress like they did in the web version!

But all the same I had lots of fun. I worked some stuff back in that I wanted to write but totally forgot about, and even managed to bring back some characters from the grave who had originally been created out of my overexcitement. There was even a full party based on our own PCs' formation that they would face against instead of one big boss. It reached a scale that was rarely seen even at my old cave's table, but I don't regret it. Well, I want to *learn* from the process, at least.

Now, regarding the enemies that sent ripples across the table this time.

During the early plotting stage, I was talking to my editor and I was told, “Don’t you think we’re lacking in characters that fit the role of the enemy?” so I feel that our responsibility is shared for these creations. To clarify from last time, I didn’t ask Lansane to draw me characters that fit my tastes, okay? We clear?

With that aside, I’d like to talk a bit about the content of this volume without diverging too much into spoiler territory. During the web novel, I wanted to up the pace and ended up cutting a lot of relevant scenes, and so we ended up with the Fellowship of the Blade appearing pretty suddenly. This great divergence began because I wanted to flesh out the clan’s beginnings.

Looking back on it now, what was I thinking? Instead of focusing on bringing Mika back quickly, there I was busily writing away about the formation of Erich’s clan once more.

All the same, I’m pleased with how I managed to get the Fellows’ personalities across. You see, in the web novel they were achieving great feats, but the readers hadn’t actually received much detail about them. This wasn’t something I realized too late or anything, but it was just sitting in my head gathering dust, so it was as good as not real. I’m quite happy that I managed to write their meetings that had been slumbering in my brain.

That brings us to our powerful foes who Erich fought in the last volume’s Middle Act. They perfectly encapsulated my own personal ta— Excuse me. They were packed with elements that I thought my readers would enjoy, to form a unique little assassin group. And even a ninja. Continuing on from the last volume, my neurons are pretty charred by now.

Allow me to say one thing in that there was a former lore story for this. I think around the time of the first or second volume I made a small reference to a group from a previous session I’d played who all shared from one cup and took on the same name. I did a little demon fusion with this party from a table from the past, my own personal tastes, and a sprinkling of some elements from notable characters from another table I’d been at.

The original One Cup Clan had formed from drinking from the cheap cup sake you can buy in stores here in Japan, but I added in my own little bit of originality for the sake of this novel. I think my friends who created the original inspiration

together will be like, “Who the hell are these people?!” but I just wanted to use those cherished memories from that session somehow.

You, dear readers who are reading this afterword, might be confused that such good memories could become what you read in this volume, but it’s love. Yes, you heard me—love.

I mean, as soon as those bastards realized that surprise attacks would increase damage, they all decided to specialize as undercover operatives who could launch deadly sneak attacks all the time! It was so ridiculous, there’s no way I’ll forget that—I just wanted to use it somehow!

You see, from the germ of an idea about how it would always be better to wait until the mountain bandits were in a drunken sleep instead of attacking them head-on, we ended up with a party *chock-full* of assassins. Can I explain just how terrible it all was for me? That’s when the GM (i.e., me) started to really value those enemies that simply don’t need sleep. I brought out golems that don’t rest, vampires who were immune to mind-affecting status ailments, and tough foes who could strike back with their totally legal but deadly shields. It was a truly fulfilling and fun time for the data munchkins of the party.

Hey, guys? This is proof that I haven’t forgiven any of you for the pain you caused me...

In truth, I’m in the midst of another campaign at another table made up of a team that’s half composed of assassin-like characters, so let’s say that I’ve been sufficiently distracted and I’ve managed to get past those memories...

Now then, the story will finally be entering Erich’s young adulthood—yes, as of just recently in fact—and although he will soon be able to save a world or two, these things need to come in their right order—from a village being attacked by barbarians, to a city endangered by destruction by a nefarious plot, to total world annihilation that could come at one accidental push of a button. I feel that it’s important to set out the required steps before doing something so grand as saving the world. If this route isn’t taken, then the hero will find himself wiped out because his level is too low.

If I pass this Luck roll and if I have all of your support, then this story will finally reach the exciting developments beginning in the tenth volume, which

will be both new and familiar to those who have read the web novel! The great feat of double digits!

I'd like to reaffirm that the theme of the novelized version of this series is "Oh, I know thi— Oh, wait, no I don— Hm? Maybe I do...I think?" so I'm excited to write a lot of new material for you. Thank you all and I hope you stick with me.

In the next volume, there may be some long-awaited reunions! With Lansane's amazing illustrations, at that!

Nothing will make me happier than being able to sit with you at the table once more, with your patience for a GM who can't hold his urge to write ad nauseam.

Now then, I hope everyone remembers their character sheets as they head out. Your GM has a wonderful clock that came with the special edition of this volume, so he'll make sure to plan the sessions in time to catch the last train. Don't be late for the next session, you hear?

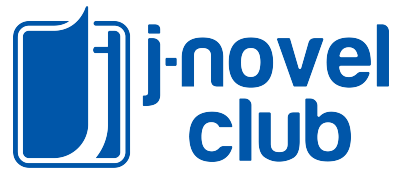
I close this afterword with the hope to once more write my name as GM on your record sheets.

[Tips] The author uploads side stories and world-building details to @Schuld3157 on Twitter as "extra replays" and "rulebook fragments."



Etan is
pretty fun
to draw.

Layne



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