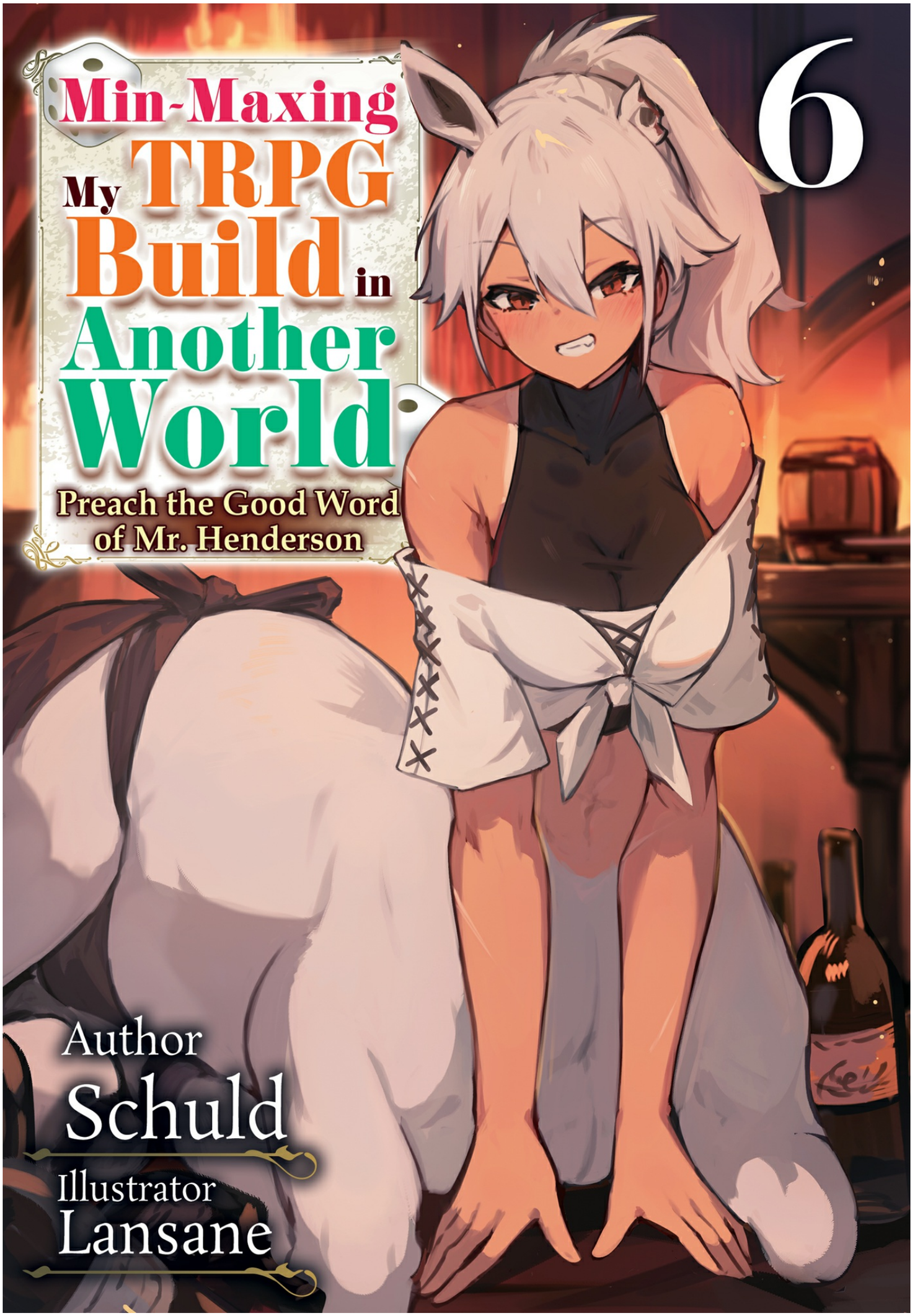
Min-Maxing My TRPG Build in Another World

Preach the Good Word of Mr. Henderson

6

Author
Schuld

Illustrator
Lansane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Henderson Scale

The "Henderson" referenced in the subtitle is Old Man Henderson, a Western tabletop legend.

Famed for overcoming a blood-thirsty GM to miraculously tie up the story he appears in, he has since become a measuring stick for how derailed a campaign can get.

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I closed my puffy eyes and decided to go back to sleep, taking in the warmth of my loved ones.
When we woke up, someone would probably quip about how silly we'd been, hoping we'd all sound more grown-up than we really were, and we'd all bashfully agree with an awkward laugh.
But until then, I wanted to savor this precious moment.
Mika
Elisa
Erich
Cecilia

“I’ll show you here and now that I’m stronger!”
Dietrich

The way she chowed down as soon as I handed her a bowl and spoon was the spitting image of a little kid.
“Your cooking’s even better than the restaurants’! Gimme more!”
“Whew, I’m full! It might actually be worth taking you back home if I get to eat this all the time.”

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. "Huh, that's weird. None of these character sheets look like they're built for the tasks I mentioned in the handout."

0.75: A minor storyline takes the place of the main plot.
E.g. "These introductions aren't making me feel any better. I told you this was a somber mercenary setting, but you'd all fit better as the student council in a skeezy romcom."

1.0: Some fatal mistake prevents the true ending from ever coming to fruition.
E.g. "I know you haven't derailed anything yet, but the *vibes*... What even is this?!"

1.25: The GM condemns his players but tries to figure out how to continue in their next session.
E.g. "What am I supposed to do with this? The captain is a shy little girl, the mercs are all in maid outfits, and one of your party members is literally a foreign adult cosplaying in a sailor outfit. And you're telling me I have to play serious roles alongside *this*?"

1.5: The party intentionally wipes.
E.g. "I don't know how to react when you pull off superhuman feats of strength like they're *pranks*."

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, I know things are progressing 'as I intended,' but this isn't the kind of atmosphere I was going for..."

2.0: The main story is irreparably busted. The campaign ends.
E.g. The GM packs his things without a word.

Over 2.0: 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.
E.g. "And so, everything has been solved with the lighthearted violence of a slapstick comic from the early aughts. Unaffected by your silliness, the hardened soldiers you fought ended up becoming the odd ones out as you drove them away and saved the world from ruin. Ugh. Is all that ends well really well?"

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Preface

Tabletop Role-Playing Game (TRPG)

An analog version of the RPG format utilizing paper rule books 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.

The collection of dishes ready to spill off the table prodded at my appetite with a delectable steam.

For appetizers, we had Lipzian Allerlei: carrots, turnips, white asparagus, and crayfish steamed together with some salt and vinegar. This was a hometown classic for Miss Celia, and the dish's simplicity and ease of preparation had made it a mainstay at her local parish.

Next to it was a glossy white mound of grated onions and fish cooked up into the shape of a leaf. The traditional recipe came straight from Mika's ancestors in the polar archipelago, and the pescatarian patty had been fine-tuned over the generations to draw out both the flavor of cod and the sweetness of onions; but of course, it wouldn't be complete without a bit of squeezed lemon to brighten it up—or so I was told.

Big and proud in the center of it all, the main dish was an opulent indulgence: forgoing venison, we had *beef* sauerbraten. Marinated for three days and three nights with our family's secret recipe—though my mother had only ever planned to pass it down to a daughter, so this was just my trying to copy what

she'd done—I'd carefully roasted it to perfection. Not only had the marinade soaked in with flavors of red wine, onions, apples, and countless other vegetables, but with a little more labor it had turned into a glistening amber gravy that just begged to be sampled.

Last of the heavy hitters, but not least, an apple pie quietly tugged at the discerning eye from the edge of the table. Though having a grid of pastry lining the top was standard practice, the crisscrossing pattern here combed in and out of itself with thin slices of caramelized apple radiating out from the center—as if the sweetest flower had just taken bloom.

Filling the gaps were an assortment of imperial staples, like eisbein, and more contributions from Mika's culture, like lamb chops and acorn bread. We'd also splurged a bit on lavish *white* bread, but like any true Rhinian, made sure to plate up a bit of black bread and wurst as well. Any table space that remained was covered in little snacks of cheese. Altogether, our impressive feast was fit to serve a knight.

"Man, I didn't think it'd be so grand."

"This reminds me of the festivals back home, Dear Brother!"

"I know—it's so *extravagant*. I almost feel guilty."

Not a single one of these dishes was bought; each and every one had been handmade. Miss Celia had borrowed her church's soup kitchen facilities during their off-hours; Mika had recreated their ancestral flavors with nothing to go off but their tongue; and I'd bitten the bullet to purchase a cut of beef.

The cost of cow meat never ceased to astound me. Even accounting for the relative difficulty of raising cattle—it goes to show how important corn had been on Earth—and the inherently aristocratic nature of rearing animals just to eat, it *still* felt pricey. The best cuts could go for as much as a whole sword, for crying out loud. No wonder we peasants could only get a taste when an old milk cow croaked.

But, hey, today was a special occasion. I was more than happy to shell out for a meal like this.

Ah, and I'd almost neglected to mention that the apple pie was the work of

none other than the Ashen Fraulein. She must've heard somewhere that we were putting together a potluck get-together and decided deep in her silkie soul that she wasn't going to let a bunch of kids show her up, because the final product was top of the line. As today's host, the thought of cutting into something one might see served at a privileged salon was honestly a bit intimidating.

"I don't think there's any need to be sorry for spoiling yourself on such a special day. Not even the Circle Immaculate demands austerity in times of festivity. I'm sure the Goddess is smiling upon us."

"That's right. It's important to give it your all, even when you're celebrating!"

"I think the same. Um, and with everything laid out..."

Miss Celia and Mika reined in their excitement over the food to lock eyes with Elisa. In a moment of harmony that had to be the result of practice, they offered a merry toast.

"Erich—Dear Brother—congratulations on a job well done!"

"Thank you!"

In response, I raised my glass of fancy wine—that my sister had swiped from the madam's stash—and was received with three clinks instantaneously.

Fall had come and I had come of age. At fifteen, I had officially been emancipated from my contract with Lady Agrippina, earning myself the seat of honor at our table.

The madam had officially selected a small party of retainers and knights, as well as a dozen or so of the latter's pages; they'd finally arrived and taken their positions just a few days ago. Working backwards, this meant that I'd been carrying the same load as all of them combined until this point, but whatever—that's fine. It was all in the past, and I wanted to keep it that way.

But if I could just add one tiny detail: while I acknowledged that Lady Agrippina's constant grumbling as she had to interview swaths of hopeful candidates in search of usable workers wasn't unwarranted, I *definitely* had it worse. All she had to do was say the word and they were hired; I knew what the work entailed, and couldn't bring myself to subject someone else to it without a

proper handoff. Trying to sort everything out so they could start off on the right foot had been even more stressful than the job itself, and my gut had been churning the whole while from pure stress.

That said, when Viscount Erftstadt's—he'd been promoted for his loyal contributions in the preceding fiasco—second son had come to serve as one of the madam's retainers, I'd been pleased to find out that he was an upstanding gentleman. His presence had made things so, *so* much easier, and yet it had *still* been arduous. The challenge was comparable to a thirty-part campaign where each session culminated in the party having to save the world.

Unfortunately, it was also a very boring sort of challenge; if my life were a book, this whole slice of it would probably be cut out...

Joking aside, all three of my guests had proposed to celebrate my work in parallel; I wasn't going to let it go unenjoyed when everyone had clearly put in their best effort to make today special, including in the realm of fashion.

As of late, Mika had begun to wear gendered clothing to suit their fancy when between sexes; today, they'd hung up their well-worn robe for a cute dress they'd bought secondhand for the occasion. The light waves of their raven hair; the intellect brimming from their amber eyes; the gentle contour of their oval face—Mika's orphic, ambiguous beauty grew more polished with each passing day. I'd hardly sipped on my drink thus far, but my maturing friend's looks were enough to make me dizzy.

On top of that, they'd relearned two more palatial dialects: when male, he slicked his curly cut back and spoke with ringing confidence; when female, she gracefully tied up her longer locks and assumed a gentler timbre. Constantly bouncing between these three demeanors always left me reeling.

In contrast, the everlasting Miss Celia continued to don her timeless fit: her modest priestess robes never faltered. However, it seemed she'd applied a bit of rouge, as her vividly red lips were a more girlish pink today.

Mika and I had both been surprised to see her in makeup, but she'd explained that the other sisters at the nunnery had gotten a hold of her before she could leave, and that they'd insisted on dolling her up since it was a special day. Whereas her unembellished features summed to a reserved prettiness, the

addition of maiden-like color served to bring that innocent charm to the forefront. Though I'd long since grown used to seeing her face, today she was mesmerizing enough to have me swallowing my breath.

But the star of the show was Elisa: clad in what may have been Lady Leizniz's magnum opus, she looked like a flower spirit in human form. Playful streaks of bright yellow contrasted with the subdued vermilion base of her ballroom gown, giving form to an autumnal style that was sure to summon a Prince Charming should she step into a banquet hall.

When she'd first gotten here, I'd poked my head outside to make sure there wasn't a pumpkin carriage waiting for this Cinderella. I guess, technically, *she* would be the magical fairy in such a story, but I was ready to test any would-be prince, even if it meant storming the imperial palace.

Being surrounded by friends and family who'd come to honor me with their best food and threads made me so incredibly happy. I downed my cup, and the wine sliding down my throat was close to coming out through my eyes as tears of joy.

Ahh... I've made it.

"Man," I cried, "that's good!"

"Yup, this is some great wine—*really* great."

"I-It's a touch too sour for me."

"You should've put honey in yours, Celia. See, like me. I put in lots!"

"But the other two made it seem so tasty without it..."

It had been a long and bumpy road from Konigstuhl, and the trials and tribulations that had arisen when my lowlife scoundrel of an employer ascended to imperial nobility had been grueling. Yet now, sharing jolly smiles over drinks, I finally felt like it had all been worth it.

Because it sure as hell hadn't in the moment.

Getting to ride the aeroship as part of my work-related duties would be a memory to cherish, but I could feel my blood freeze solid when we'd had to make an emergency landing due to an arcane engine malfunction. That wasn't

even to mention how the especially guilty among the Ubiorum nobles had gone for a suicidal last-ditch effort upon seeing the fate of Viscount Liplar.

I'd been sent to repay those whose hospitality included meals with "secret ingredients," so to speak, over a dozen times; my inn had been set ablaze while patrolling the county twice; once I'd established myself as Lady Agrippina's right-hand man, those who tried to kidnap me for leverage numbered twenty and change; and I'd had to litigate libelous claims before His Majesty thrice. Oh, and I couldn't even be bothered to count how often I'd had to fend off an attempt on my life.

I had been very, very busy...to the point where the once-insurmountable task of earning fifteen-plus drachmae for my sister now seemed like a simple undertaking. In hindsight, earning enough to cover her tuition, room, and board all by myself would still have been an easier task.

But that was all in the past. I was *free*. I was free from the gilded filth of high society that made the capital's septic tanks look clean, but more pressingly, from the heartless woman who'd filled my plate with *just* enough work that I'd be able to do it with a little suffering.

Verily, a drink taken in triumph was the finest delight in all the senses!

"All right," Mika said, "before we dig in, let's get these in Erich's hands."

"Get what in my hands?"

As I poured myself another cupful, Mika pulled out a small bag. Seeing this, Miss Celia clasped her hands together with a small "Ah!" and reached into her robes to produce a wrapped package. Elisa, too, brought out a tiny box that had been hidden out of sight.

"Your coming-of-age presents," Mika explained. "Come on. Don't tell me you thought you could get away with giving *me* one without getting one in return."

"What?! But that was just because your family's too far away to send you their own..."

Imperial custom dictated that family or older mentor figures in a new adult's life were to give them gifts as a sign of good tidings to come. Receiving gifts from people in the same generation wasn't really a thing, but Mika's village was

so remote that the nation's medieval postal system couldn't facilitate the timely delivery of a proper gift.

I knew that their master in magecraft would certainly commemorate the occasion and whatever their family had sent through their local magistrate would arrive eventually, but letting the big day pass without anything to note seemed like a shame to me. So, I'd given them a full ehrengarde set for their birthday. Physical age aside, I still considered myself a grown-up on the inside; seeing Mika eye their peers at the College with sheepish envy when they showed off their own coming-of-age gifts had made it impossible to stand idle.

Of course, I hadn't given them just any old ehrengarde set. I'd put every ounce of my Scale IX Dexterity into each piece, and sculpted the adventurer after myself, the nun after Miss Celia, and the magia after Mika and Elisa. I'd wanted it to be something with sentimental value. They'd loved the gift, and we'd spend the whole day just playing games with those pieces...but I hadn't expected to get a gift back.

"Go on," Mika goaded. "Open it."

The day had only begun, and I was already losing track of how many times I'd been brought to the brink of tears. Swallowing them back with nothing but my pride as a man, I obliged and took the first of the presents lined up before me.

"Wow!"

Opening Mika's bag, I found a small fold-up shovel. Designed with portability in mind, it was made of a particularly light metal—an arcane alloy! And there was even some kind of spell woven into the tip.

"Enchanting tools is part of my practical lessons. Once I'm a real oikodomurge, sometimes I'll have to employ a bunch of construction workers at once, right? So part of my job will be enhancing stuff like shovels and pickaxes to make it easier to dig."

Apparently, big projects like widening canals or constructing new riverbanks for flood control weren't entirely the realm of oikodomurgy. Trying to make major renovations with pure magecraft came with a whole host of issues: not only did it take giant swaths of mana, but the scope increased the risk of a botched spell and the possibility that a repairman years down the line might not

be able to work on top of the legacy formulae on-site. Thus, a lot of the infrastructure of the Empire was still built off the backs of hardworking blue-collar sorts.

“Since conjuring permanent enchantments is technically part of my education, I managed to ask my master for a good base to work with, and then put my spell on that. I figured it’ll come in handy since you’ll be camping outside a lot.”

“It will! I’m sure I’ll dig a million holes out there. Thanks!”

For an adventurer paving his way off the beaten path, the march from place to place was second in importance only to battle. Digging could lead to fresh groundwater or create a makeshift toilet; in bad weather, I’d be able to plow through snow or mud to keep moving. A good shovel was as important to outdoor life as a tent or sleeping bag, and I’d been blessed with a light, compact, mystic masterpiece from the get-go. I must’ve been the luckiest adventurer in all the Empire.

I giddily folded and unfolded it, marveling at the smoothness of its make, but then noticed Miss Celia looking restless and decided to open up her gift next.

“It’s...a hairpiece. This is beautiful.”

“As minor as this may be, I’ve taken the liberty of placing a blessing on it. Though, I’m a smidgen ashamed to admit that the barrette was originally my grandaunt’s.”

I unwrapped the parcel to discover a silver hair ornament. Plain and unembellished, it lacked a jewel to cap it off, but the ivy pattern carved into it was gorgeous and suitable for any occasion. Flourishing on barren stone walls, these vines had come to represent tenacity and were a popular symbol among the upper class. Complete with the blessing of a devout damsel adored by Mother Night, the trinket was utterly invaluable.

“I prayed that your lush locks might remain neatly together even in the midst of a trying journey. The Night Goddess is a protector of maidenhood, and miracles sanctifying hair are part of Her repertoire.”

“As wasteful as it feels to accept this as a man who will sweat and toil, I’m

honored.”

“I’m glad to see you’ve taken to it. Also, I supposed that an ornament of pure silver might come in handy should you ever find yourself in dire need of money.”

“Ha, please. I’d sooner pawn off my beating heart than part with this.”

I would never have thought of the secondary intent behind her choice of gift. Come to think of it, I’d read that the clergy carried sacred emblems crafted from precious metals on their person for just this purpose; it was very much in Miss Celia’s character to be so considerate.

“But more than that, we vampires have a custom of giving silver crafts to those who come of age.”

“Oh? And why is that?”

“As a warning. It is a prayer: let not thyself sink to the depths of a bloodsucker—forever remember thyself as thou art now, in this fleeting moment of thy never-ending history.”

Hers was a wish born from her vampiric roots; for as light as the hairpiece was, it weighed heavy in my hands. I swore to treasure it. Silver demanded care to remain lustrous, after all. I knew the basics of keeping it clean, but I’d need to get some maintenance supplies for the thing sooner rather than later.

“As a mensch, I doubt you will ever grow weary of life, Erich. But when you look at that ornament, I ask that you remember the time we have spent together.”

“Miss Celia,” I trailed off for a moment, lost in thought. “Very well. I will keep these days in my heart forever. And one day, I will be there to celebrate your coming of age as you have mine.”

“Whoa, Erich. How old are we gonna be by then?”

“Old enough to have grandkids, I bet, but we’ll have more money to spare by then too. We’re going to throw her a first-class party, so get ready to chip in.”

“All right, old pal, you got me. A request from you, for the sake of our good friend? It looks like I don’t get a say in the matter: I’ll make sure to live a long

life.”

“I shall look forward to it,” Miss Celia said with a giggle. “I’m sure the years will be kind to you both.”

By the time Miss Celia would come of age, we’d be geezers pushing on seventy. Laughing about how much of a struggle it’d be to get there was an acutely mortal joke; the immortal, in turn, watched over us dearly.

To commemorate the moment, I undid the haphazard bindings on my hair and refastened it with her gift. Once I was done, Elisa started to rock back and forth in anticipation of her turn—I was so happy to see her acting her age every now and again when it was just us four—so I opened her present.

“This is...cologne?”

“Yes! I did my best to make it for you!”

The box contained a small glass bottle. Though the glass was thick, I noticed a familiar mystic pattern radiating off it upon closer inspection: Lady Agrippina had enchanted this phial. My best guess was that she’d used her trademark magic to enlarge the volume of the inside. While it wasn’t as grandiose as full-on wormholes, it was amazing to think she’d pulled out such an intricate trick just for this.

“Can I try it?”

“Of course!”

Clearly wanting to hear my opinion, my sister had been fidgeting around and answered with great excitement as soon as I asked. Without further ado, I spritzed a bit on my wrist.

“Ooh, what a soft aroma,” Mika said. “Is that...soap? Or maybe flowers?”

“I love these sorts of fragrances,” Miss Celia added. “I’m sure I would be able to sleep soundly if my bedsheets smelled like this.”

Activated by the warmth of my skin, the scent began to travel. The other two’s comments were more than mere puffery: it really did give off a gentle impression. As hazy as they were, the smell resurrected memories of the fancy fabric softeners I’d used a lifetime ago.

It wasn't quite floral, per se, but it also wasn't as uninteresting as the common soaps used throughout the land. For reasons beyond my understanding, the opaque fragrance reminded me of our mother in Konigstuhl.

"I tailored the perfume just for you, Dear Brother. I worked really hard to think of a smell that you could wear anywhere with anyone, even if they have different noses!"

Elisa puffed up her chest with a grin so proud that I could practically see a manga-style label that read "SMUG" pop up behind her. *Oh, my baby sister really is the cutest.*

"You probably won't get to bathe as often as you'd like on an adventure, but I still wanted you to *feel* clean. And I thought that maybe people making requests would like you better if you smelled nice."

To have this adorable little angel care for me so much that she'd make me a personalized cologne—in noble spheres, scents were expected to be tailored to a person's natural odor—made me the happiest brother in the whole wide world. No matter what anyone else said, I refused to concede this point.

"Thank you—thank *all* of you. I'll take care of each and every one of these gifts. And whenever I use them, I'll think of you."

I just barely managed to hold back my tears, but I have to admit that the last few words had been delivered with a choked-up voice.

"We're just glad you like them," Mika said.

"Exactly," Miss Celia concurred.

"I agree," Elisa added on. "I was honestly a bit worried you wouldn't like it... I thought maybe it wasn't gallant enough for a man's coming of age."

"But you did a great job, Elisa! Thinking about how it might affect Erich's impression on his employers is really considerate."

Mika's off-the-cuff praise put a bashful grin on Elisa's face. Seeing how close the two of them had gotten naturally tugged at the corners of my mouth too.

But with the gifts all accounted for, it was time to dig in before our dishes got cold. We offered a quick prayer of thanks for the food on the table and got to it:

reaching this way and that to whatever caught our tongues' attention, we ate, drank, and shared our thoughts on everything we sampled in blissful merriment.

The mountain of food we'd piled up vanished into our stomachs in no time flat. After the main course was finished, the apple pie we'd been saving for dessert disappeared with similar gusto; we had to go back to the kitchen and slice up cheeses and dried meats just to pair with the rest of our drinks. I'd underestimated both the voracity of a growing body and the ease of inhaling food in good company.

Summing the wine Elisa had pilfered from the atelier with the fruit-based liquor and mead I'd had at home, we'd gone through over half of our stock when Mika started up a new line of conversation out of the blue.

"Boy, alcohol tastes great when you're having fun. They have some real premium stuff at fancy banquets, but I can never concentrate on the flavor there."

"Banquets? Oh, the ones you accompany your master to."

"Yeah, those."

Mika sipped on mead diluted with cold well water as their eyes wandered to Miss Celia. She, too, was in a well-done state, and had pulled Elisa to the side for an impromptu lesson in ehrengarde.

"I already got a taste of all the dotted lines in the sand from my time as a student, but they just keep coming as you grow up. No matter how smart you are, magia have a part to play as bureaucrats, I guess."

"The blooms of high society, so splendiferous from afar, were naught but the prisoners of a walled garden...or something like that?"

"Yup—at least as long as I stick around at the College. I could go hole up somewhere or stay out on permanent fieldwork to get away from it, but it's hard to get funding as a hermit. A researcher's stipend won't even be close to enough to cover everything with how expensive my line of work will be."

Seeing them shake their head in defeat, I was all at once reminded that Elisa would soon be walking the same path. Maybe that was why I let such a selfish

request slip.

“Hey...old chum? Take care of my sister—of Elisa for me.”

In the not-too-distant future, I would leave the capital behind to realize my long-awaited dream of adventure. There was no mincing words: I was leaving Elisa behind, alone, in the capital of vanity, all to suit my own desires.

Yes, Lady Agrippina had said she was fit to enroll as an official student; yes, I’d seen how much she’d grown with my own two eyes. But she was just a ten-year-old kid. That made her two years younger than I had been when I first came to Berylin.

At ten, she would have been an elementary schooler on Earth, and wouldn’t have even been particularly close to middle school age. This was when most kids still craved attention from their family, and here I was, sending her off into a den of noble children to study at the College alone. My actions were downright irresponsible.

I thought I’d made up my mind. I’d spent so much time talking to Elisa and Lady Agrippina to come up with a compromise we could all agree on, but the tiniest of thorns still remained in my heart: wasn’t I supposed to stay by her side until the Empire guaranteed her right to life as a citizen?

“Adventure, huh?”

I’d been staring down the grimacing fellow on the other side of my wine who was killing the festive mood when Mika suddenly mused to themselves in contemplation.

“You know, I really thought you were going to use all your newfound connections to sign up with the College too.”

Swirling around their drink, they watched the ensuing whirlpool with downcast eyes; the booze must have been taking its course, as their expression oozed sentimentality. It made sense, considering how they’d taken such a liking to the wine that they hadn’t diluted it at all.

“What’s with you all of a sudden?” I asked. “I’ve been telling you about how I want to be an adventurer since we first met.”

“I know, I know. It’s just, seeing you work so earnestly made me start dreaming. With your sister’s tuition taken care of, I couldn’t see any other reason you’d have to keep at it like that.”

Out of nowhere, Mika reached out and brushed their thumb over my nose. I’d suffered a wound there a few months back.

“It’s weird to push yourself so hard that you end up with injuries on your face, you know?”

Their hand moved from my nose to my cheek, to my forehead and to my lips, their fingers tracing the invisible damage I’d suffered. These were all hits I’d taken in this past year, but the alfar had disappeared the scars because they weren’t cute enough for their liking.

“I’m glad they didn’t leave a mark... I mean it.” I wanted to tease Mika for remembering so perfectly, but they downed the rest of their drink, so I refilled their cup instead. Immediately, they gulped down another half a glass and let out a disappointed sigh. “I was kinda looking forward to it, you know? Having both you and Elisa come over to your old chum Mika for tutoring.”

“What’s gotten into you, Mika? Even if I *did* enroll, we’d be studying in different Schools with different end goals. My employer’s a Daybreak scholar, remember?”

“But intercadre friendships are everywhere. Okay, First Light thinkers *are* kinda isolationist, but at least we aren’t like those Midheaven bats. Now *those* are people with a real commitment to not having friends.”

It was a bit weird of them to bring up the School of Midheaven as a foil only to call them bats, but I did my best to track along with my friend’s drunken rambling. After all, Mika knew better than anyone else how tough it was not to have friends.

The teachings of a good master were priceless, but it wasn’t as if one professor would be in charge of all of a student’s lectures. Life at the Imperial College of Magic was tough without the guidance of someone who’d walked in the same shoes a year or two prior. Having to reinvent their own formula for writing essays and critiques had just been the first in a long list of hardships Mika had endured due to their lack of connections. While I couldn’t claim to

truly understand the finer nuances as a mere servant, watching their day-to-day life was enough to understand the severity of their struggle.

The more stories I heard, the more my opinion consolidated into, "*Wow*, that's rough." Having only attended a comparatively painless Japanese university, it was telling that I never once heard any mention of signing in for a friend or looking up past exam questions: this really was the highest institution for learning magecraft, composed only of the most diehard individuals.

The College was no asylum for moratorium; it was a proving ground to polish one's skills in pursuit of the kind of purpose that would define an entire life. I was made constantly aware that it was not the sort of environment that would tolerate those who do no more than show up.

I could not follow them there—not Mika, and not Elisa. Even if I'd decided to stay in the capital and serve Lady Agrippina, I would never have become a magus; the College was a place out of my reach.

Despite knowing that coddling my sister forever wasn't the right path to being a good brother, I couldn't help *wanting* to be there for her.

"Oh well," Mika sighed dramatically. "I guess you're the kind of mean older brother who can't even let his best friend dream..."

"Come on..."

"...but you still are my best friend. So consider your request accepted. Don't you worry about *our* little sister."

Mika emphatically raised their glass beside me, but in that moment, their face was utterly alien to me. It wasn't the usual smile of my familiar old chum, but the expression of someone ready to commit to something, of someone who wanted to lend their hand to another—of an adult.

"But you owe me one, okay? And it's not gonna be cheap, so you better be ready!"

"...You have my word, Professor Mika the Great. I swear to repay this debt no matter the cost."

"Mm, well, 'tis not a bother to me. I shall look forward to a most handsome

recompense, adventurer."

Breaking out into laughter from our usual theatrics, we clinked our cups together and downed what was left of our drinks.

"Besides, I won't say no to having a decoy."

Mika's addendum was delivered with a heavy sigh reeking of alcohol, and I couldn't help but sigh with them. I'd done such a good job until this point too, but eventually my greatest fears had come to fruition.

It was summer. Mika and I had just closed up our usual ehrengarde hustle for the day, and we went out shopping to piece together some ingredients for supper. There, in a two-bit market in the southern low quarter, whom did we run into but *Lady Leizniz*?

Apparently, the good dean had once been a struggling student of common birth herself; she had spent many a day scouring these paupers' vendors in search of the best deal. She, too, had gone shopping with her friends, pooling together their piddling savings to turn precious honey, sugar, or fruits into jams and treats that they could all enjoy together.

Whenever work had her down—now that I understood what that meant, I couldn't fault her here—she would don a mystic disguise to render herself a mensch and retrace the steps of her childhood. Those faraway days sometimes led her here, to the lowly market she'd once frequented.

That's right: we had run into her on one of her sentimental walks down memory lane out of sheer bad luck.

Upon spotting a familiar head of blond among the crowd, her eyes instantly went to the stunning raven-haired boy—at the time—whom she promptly took a liking to. Convincing herself that it was perfectly acceptable for the dean of a cadre to speak to some unknown kid because he was "friends with another boy whom she took good care of," the unhinged wraith let her base instincts take hold and called out to us. Before we could so much as get a word in edgewise, Mika and I found ourselves at Lady Leizniz's favorite tailor shop.

Even now, I could remember how the epiphany had set in in my mind: *So this is how the protagonists feel in horror films.*

I whirled around upon hearing an unnatural panting behind me, only to see a wraith groping the air with outstretched hands and an expression that toed the line of insanity.

Can you blame me for letting out a scared yelp?

What followed was an exploration of depravity, in which Lady Leizniz off-loaded the soul-soothing burden she had planned to place on a cheap honey lemonade onto us. Mumbling something about master-servant themes, she dressed Mika up in a lavish costume while having me pose behind him like a retainer, and then sat me on my old chum's lap for reasons beyond my comprehension. This went on for *hours*; the unknowable depth and breadth of her twisted predilections once again struck the fear of gods into my soul.

Worse still, her reaction to Mika's word about being tivisco was so unabashedly emotional that her ephemeral body began to dissipate. As I watched her convulse to the words, "So...wholesome!" and legitimately verge on vanishing entirely, I secretly wished to myself that she'd take the opportunity to claim an eternal resting spot in the gods' laps.

Obviously, I knew that no matter how hopelessly perverted she was, Lady Leizniz was one of the madam's key backers and an irreplaceable ally in helping us prop up the Ubiorum county. But after her dragging my best friend into her insane fashion shows and lining us up like dress-up dolls, I had a gripe or two etched into my heart.

"Some burdens are too much to bear alone," Mika said. "But we'll be fine together. So don't worry about us, old pal."

"...Thanks."

"Come on, Erich. Don't be so tactless—you can't thank me there! *Our* sister, remember?"

As we laughed together once more, a markedly less cordial shriek cut through the room.

"No fair! That's! Not! Fair!"

"It is perfectly fair, Elisa. This is a standard tactic, as honest as they come."

Curious as to what had happened, we went over and leaned into the table to check the board—only to find an absolutely unplayable position.

"But I can't take this guardsman because the emperor is behind him, and I

can’t go on this side because there’s a messenger and watchman there, and I can’t go around because of your dragon knight... You get to take all my major pieces for free!”

“Yes, because I have played to my pieces’ strengths. Now, what will you do?”

I expected no less from Miss Celia: she was merciless. She’d constructed a front line of pieces that were either conditionally invincible or could only be traded off at a disadvantage for her opponent. With the midfield packed, her major pieces were free to maneuver into the ideal squares to wreak havoc on Elisa’s army.

From the sounds I’d picked up while talking to Mika, it sounded like she’d been playing her trademark blitz style. Elisa had probably gotten swept up in her pace; there was no way my sister could’ve kept up. Even at four-piece odds, the gap in knowledge and experience was too great.

“Dear Brother...”

Elisa looked up at me with puppy-dog eyes, but the best I could do was to make a pained expression and shake my head. *Sorry, Elisa. With perfect play, it’s still mate in fifteen.*

Realizing what I was getting at, my sister sadly tipped over her own emperor.

“Mmrgh,” she pouted. “But I’ve never lost to my dear brother!”

“How terribly odd,” Miss Celia said quizzically. “Erich and I are evenly matched over the board. In fact, I’ve been on a losing streak for our past few bouts.”

“Ohh,” Mika groaned, “there you go again. Why are you always like this?”

Although Elisa had matured tremendously in the emotional department, the sight of her biting her lip in frustration proved that she had yet to tread into the higher cognitive territory of asking *why* she had lost. For all her improvement in day-to-day life, managing her emotions, and theoretical magecraft, she remained a child in many aspects.

In short, I’d figured letting her play for fun without thinking too much about what she was doing—as a child so often will—was best for her mental health,

and I let her do as she pleased. After all, that was all one could really expect from a ten-year-old.

I had once been the same way. I'd only started learning to smash together hit-confirm combos in middle school; in elementary, I'd preferred wurms with huge power and toughness over all-you-can-burn birds; the weight of card draw and the evil of forced discards were foreign to me as I excitedly slammed down dragons with twinkly blue eyes. Excitement over victories and frustration over losses were simple feelings when divorced from an understanding of how the result had come about, but I thought they were the building blocks to growing into more robust emotions.

That's why it was fine for me to go easy on Elisa. Besides, ehrengarde was a popular pastime among the gentry; eventually, Lady Agrippina would need to give her a thorough *initiation*. When that day came, I figured my sister would be a lot happier if she had good memories of thoughtless, innocent fun to associate with the game. Drilling the importance of a win-loss ratio into her from the outset could turn her off the concept of games and play entirely; that would be such a sad way to live.

"Don't worry, Elisa. Leave it to me. Your big brother will avenge you!"

But that was that, and this was this. What kind of brother would I be if I let my baby sister get bullied to tears without putting up a fight? This was my chance to show off...or so I thought.

With an ironically pleasant click, Miss Celia made a move that dropped a massive pit straight into my stomach.

"Huh? What? *Huh?* Wait, no, but my knight is still active, and I've got this adventurer, so maybe..."

"No, Erich, I think you're finished in...eleven? No, wait—*twelve* moves."

"Very close, Mika. It is precisely thirteen."

Firing my brain on all cylinders, I analyzed as many prospective board states as Parallel Processing would allow, but every possible line was as bad as Miss Celia's claim of checkmate—or worse. I was done. Whether I abdicated or fled with my emperor, I would lose this game in thirteen moves' time.

“I...”

“You?” The holy woman goaded me on with a beaming smile.

“I resign,” I wrung out in pain. “Wait, no, *what*? Hold on, where did I go wrong? Uh, maybe...uh? No, but I swear we were even around this point. This dragon knight exchange wasn’t *bait*, was it?”

Gluing myself to the board and combing through every possibility, I still couldn’t figure out what had triggered my total, one-sided defeat. I hadn’t made any serious blunders, nor had I made so much as an outright mistake. *How the hell did I lose?!*

Miss Celia had claimed victory without the slightest lapse in judgment. It was as if I had been spellbound by her play, my mind warped by implicit suggestions coded into her decisions. Losing always hurt, but losing like *this* made me so mad I wanted to hurl; I’d always found it peculiar how the generals of the Three Kingdoms were always dying of indignation like it was a popular fad, but I now understood their pain all too well.

Still stubbornly staring at the board, I looked up to see Miss Celia looking down on me with a thoroughly contented expression. I asked her to explain in a postmortem, to which she replied, “I refuse to say!” Evidently, she was so elated about beating me that the mischievous side she ordinarily kept hidden had come out in full force.

“O-One more! Give me one more game!”

I can’t go out like this! Think of my pride—my honor! Losing in fewer than a hundred moves after proudly declaring I’d win is so *embarrassing!*

Unable to bear the holes in my heart bored out by Elisa’s apathetic gaze, I swallowed my pride and desperately pleaded for a rematch.

“Certainly not, Erich,” the priestess answered succinctly. “Wherever might one find a war of vengeance waged twice or thrice over? First, you would need to avenge *yourself* before making any new attempt in the name of your sister’s honor.” Though her words were those of a mature adult chastising a misbehaving child, her body language told a different story. Placing a single finger over her smug, unladylike grin, she capped her lecture off with a cheeky

“Too bad.”

Argh! I hated to admit it, but she had a point: playing another game to clear my own name and then *another* after that in a second attempt at upholding Elisa’s was, well, inelegant. I knew that, but—just—ugh!

I was so genuinely afflicted that I threw all etiquette to the wayside—though I knew in the back of my mind that Miss Celia would forgive me—and cradled my head in my hands. Not only had I lost after talking a big game, but I was a trickster at heart. My play was a statement of character: I wanted to win, but more importantly, I wanted to do it in a way that befuddled my opponent. Being steamrolled by an honest attacker like her made me seethe uncontrollably.

I’d reflected on my first childhood when musing on Elisa’s development, but I hadn’t expected to relive those painful experiences in my second one. Oh, dammit! The forgotten pain of playing against a friend’s older brother who knew all the strongest techniques in a game swelled up and made me want to bite straight through my lip.

“Tee hee, it has been quite some time since I’ve enjoyed a victory so decisive. I suppose classic gambits still have their place.”

Despite announcing that she wouldn’t divulge her secrets, Miss Celia happily laid out a trail of crumbs. *Wait, was she playing a theoretical opening?!*

“My grandaunt was once engrossed in the game herself, and I found a record book in her library. Nowadays, this opening has been solved, and it doesn’t work at all against the most dedicated players. But there are plenty of traps for someone who’s never seen it before to fall right into.”

Grah! I didn’t even think of that!

Still, I couldn’t call foul. While learning through real games and solo theorycrafting as I’d done was obviously fair play, so too was poring over the teachings of those who had come before. If the virtuosos of days gone by had left us records of how they’d advanced the metagame, what kind of data munchkin would I be to refute their contributions?

Fine, I’ll shut up. It was my fault for not knowing the line, and it was doubly my

fault for losing to it.

"So let us chalk today up as my victory. It won't hurt to let me quit while I'm ahead every now and again, will it?"

"Hrgh...fine. But be warned that I'll study up to tear right through your formation by our next bout."

"I shall look forward to it."

Accepting my defeat, I decided to drown my sorrows in what little booze remained; yet as I poured out another glass, Miss Celia suddenly sat up straight on the other side of the table. Figuring something was up, I put down my cup and did likewise. Two gems the hue of pigeon blood stared right into my eyes as she began to speak.

"Listen well, Erich. It is frustrating to end on a loss, isn't it?"

Not seeing what she was getting at, I hesitantly answered, "Of course. Very much so."

"In that case..."

Miss Celia plucked a piece off the board—one that she'd lovingly used since the day she'd first bought it at my stall so many moons ago. The empress served as the cornerstone of her aggressive play, and the solemn vampire sitting upon her throne was something I'd been inspired to carve after meeting her.

"If it truly vexes you that you have lost our final match, then you must promise me not to die. One day, I will leave the capital and return to my monastery...but even so, you must come to challenge me again. Until that day comes, I will entrust this piece to you."

She took my hand and pressed the small statuette into my palm. Made of nothing more than wood and a coat of metal, the piece felt heavier than solid gold; its message was weighty enough to pin my hand to the floor.

Despite being far from my finest work, Miss Celia had cherished this vampiric empress so dearly that she carried it with her everywhere in case the opportunity to play ehrengarde ever arrived unexpectedly. To entrust it to me was to emphasize the gravity of this oath.

I was happy to make that promise; I didn't want to let our record end on this note anyway. No matter whom I played from here on out, I was sure I wouldn't be able to really revel in my victories until I settled the score with her.

"I give you my word," I said, squeezing the woodwork tight. "One day, I will best you over the board and return this piece."

My list of unbreakable vows grew once more. Yet as heavy as each pact was, they were not burdens weighing upon my shoulders; they were the foundation upon which I built myself.

As people, promises were what fueled us—what gave us the strength to endure in our darkest hour and what summoned will beyond ordinary means in the moment of truth. Bonds, and the oaths made along their lines, were so powerful that some TRPG designers went out of their way to codify their mechanics. While I wasn't receiving any physical buffs, every promise I had to fulfill cemented my resolve to live on.

Pleased with the memento, I made a mental note to find a small pouch so I'd be able to hang the piece from my neck—when suddenly, I heard a sniffle.

I turned to see Elisa trembling with her hands balled up into tight fists in her lap. Her head was pointed straight up in an attempt to hold herself back, but the sniveling didn't stop, and her nose had turned bright red. The tears bubbling up in her eyes were on the precipice of streaming down her face; she tried her hardest not to blink so as to keep them contained, but at last, she reached her limit and clung to me.

The board collapsed and the pieces went flying as Elisa buried her face in my stomach and cried.

"No...never mind! Don't go, Dear Brother!"

"Elisa..."

The noble demeanor she'd painstakingly built up melted away, leaving behind only a little girl of ten. Stripped of showy vanity and effortful diligence alike, all that remained was Elisa in her purest form. She'd grown up and done her absolute best to see me off with a smile, but she was still too young. The only thing I could do for my baby sister as she wailed in manifest sorrow was to let

my instincts take the wheel and hold her tight.

“Elisa, I—oh, I...”

“Dear Brotheeer! I—I want you to be happy and to do what you want, but I feel so lonely! Don’t leave meee!”

“Elisa!”

If a good brother were here in my place, what would he have done? Maybe he would have gently comforted her with choice words of wisdom. Or perhaps he would have pushed his own ego aside and promised her that he would stay after all.

Alas, the only brother here was a pathetic one, incapable of doing either. Too inept to find a solution, I found myself swept up in the same loneliness and began crying myself.

I had just declared that promises built the foundation that made people strong; yet they were also the foundation of the strongest penitence.

My progress was the result of the ambitions I had imposed upon myself. They were also in service of the unforgettable oath I had made to Margit under the setting sun. Right now, she was waiting for me in our little canton, continuing to polish her skills—I knew it. This wasn’t the self-important complacency of a delusional man; I knew that she would uphold our promise and believe in me to hold up my end, because it was *her*. Whenever I teetered at the edge of ruin or slumped into the pits of my mind, my earring would always jingle; it was as if the wearer of its other half were here to reprove.

At the same time, I had sworn to make things right for Elisa: I had declared that she would be able to return home to Konigstuhl with my help. Not only was this a vow I had etched into my own soul, but those had been the words I’d used to pry her away from the family and home she had so desperately clung to.

To fulfill both of these promises was a difficult endeavor. With the appearance of a dependable patron and Elisa’s efforts to solidify herself as her own person, I could justify leaving the capital by myself in pursuit of my dreams —I *could*, but I had long balked over whether or not I *should*.

Eventually, I had taken the plunge thanks to my sister nudging me along...but it must have hurt for her. Despite her best efforts, seeing me talk about my future and say my farewells to the others must have driven the message deep into her heart: I could no longer be by her side.

Life was a Herculean challenge. I held every one of my promises near to my heart. Elisa and Margit and Mika and Miss Celia—they all meant the world to me. In a critical moment, if it ever came down to my life or one of theirs, I would bare my neck without any hesitation.

Why could the gods not bless man with the capacity for perfection? Why could we not act in total fairness across the globe?

Nothing could torment me more than my inability to be in more than one place at a time, or the impossibility of freely moving between faraway lands. I couldn't help but wonder what could have been if only I'd mastered space-bending magic, letting me be perennially one portal away from visiting Berylin.

Yet even as someone blessed with IX: Divine Favor in a physical attribute and IX: Divine skill in swordplay, the ability to teleport living things remained unattainably distant. Outside a handful of the most brilliant minds *within the College*, it was a lost art; I could have reallocated every point of experience I'd ever gotten and still come up short.

I understood why, on paper. This one trick could invalidate eighty percent of the scenarios life threw at me, and the world refused to hand out such privilege lightly. The logic was the same in interpersonal relationships: I bet the world had its qualms about letting us indulge in such convenience.

But even so, I couldn't help but grieve. I could see the path that I had refused to walk, and the thought that it may have allayed my beloved sister's anguish even the slightest bit broke my heart.

I knew there was no right answer, but I groped for some unfair cheat or trickery in the vain hope that maybe there was. Isn't that what makes us human?

Before I knew it, two wailing voices had become four.

Mika was quietly sobbing, and Miss Celia had begun to whimper. The four of

us turned into one big blob, bound in a tight hug and melting into tears as we begged for our farewell to wait.

I was setting off to lands farther than Osaka from Edo, in an era where distance was not so easily covered; for Mika and Miss Celia, this could very well be our final goodbye.

Worst of all, I was to be an adventurer: I planned to throw myself into life-threatening danger just to sate my childish dreams. Both of them had seen firsthand how I carried myself in the face of peril; although they knew me as a hardy guy, they were all too aware that I wasn't unkillable.

Without Mika's support, I would have been cleaved in two, doomed to wander the ichor maze as one of the Craving Blade's zombies forever. If Miss Celia had been a minute—no, *half* a minute later to rescue me, I would have ended up a lifeless husk, warped beyond recognition.

On top of that, I'd toed the line of fatality more times than I could count on my hands as Lady Agrippina's retainer. Powerful enemies had begun to see me as an integral part of her operation, and sent their best assassins my way as groundwork for the bigger kill.

They'd seen me come home injured time and time again. Even though they believed I was resolute enough to pull through, there was no getting rid of the fear hiding in the backs of their minds. Whether mortal or immortal, worry and apprehension were the unbreakable curses placed on sentient life.

I knew they wanted to celebrate my future path. I knew they believed I'd succeed. But asking them to hold back after seeing us break out into tears was too much to ask.

Combined with the excess of drinks, we ended up crying ourselves to sleep.

When I came to, the four of us were in my bed. It was much too small for three growing adolescents and one child; even snuggled together, we barely fit. It looked like the Ashen Fraulein had been kind enough to carry us up.

I took in everyone's presence with a hazy mind. Elisa was balled up and nuzzled into my chest; Mika was cradling us both from the front; Miss Celia had slipped her arm around my waist and hugged both of us siblings at once.

Not only had I just become an adult man, but I had fifty years of total experience under my belt. I know I shouldn't have let myself get so hysterical in the first place...but forgive me. Call it a formal farewell between friends and family not easily parted.

I closed my puffy eyes and decided to go back to sleep, taking in the warmth of my loved ones. When we woke up, someone would probably quip about how silly we'd been, to sound more grown up than we really were, and we'd all bashfully agree with an awkward laugh. But until then, I wanted to savor this precious moment.

The world outside was dark: day had yet to break. No one could fault me for enjoying a moment of peace when the sun was still down.

I could feel something deep inside. No matter where I went or how onerous my adversity, I would find the strength to return here so long as this warmth lingered in my heart.

[Tips] The power of friendship is real indeed. At times, bonds forged through happenstance and impassioned performances may cause a GM to grant mercy to a PC on the verge of death. That this is possible at all is one of tabletop gaming's greatest charms.

Early Autumn of the Fifteenth Year

Party Disbandment

When the PCs making up the party have differing objectives, they may no longer have compelling reason to walk the same path and can split up as a result. Most of the time, this occurs after a campaign ends: though each goes to their own path, ties once forged prove difficult to break forever.

Regularly mingling with the pretty boys and girls that populated the palatial servants' room only threatened to worsen my already-twisted perception of beauty; yet with the end in sight, the scenery did rouse some kind of sentiment within me.

A few days had passed since our youthful farewell party, too precious to recall without blushing. The handoff process was officially complete, and my days as Lady Agrippina's steward were coming to an end.

Today was my last day on the job. Now that the replacement chamberlains had completed their training regimen, I had finally seen my duties through. And please, don't scoff at the need to establish a full-fledged instructional doctrine for "mere" servants: they were to be the madam's closest aides, fit to be her hands and feet and even to deal with other nobles on her behalf.

They were no less important than a pair of shoes or a well-trimmed set of nails to the average salaryman. Any blemishes to one's footwear—or even just wearing a pair that didn't suit one's stature—was enough to draw out a snide remark; someone handing out a business card with grime under their fingernails was sure to leave a middling impression no matter how immaculately tailored their suit. Lady Agrippina's hired help did not just reflect on themselves, but on her.

Besides, retainers were not just handy grabber tools meant to pick up TV remotes; they were expected to lay down their lives as a lord's first line of

defense if the need arose. If you need any more convincing that plucking a charming face off the streets wouldn't suffice, I could tell that most of the exhibits lounging around in this museum of good looks exhibited palpable evidence of martial prowess.

On top of that, trusted adjutants doubled as messengers and couriers. Entrusting a noncombatant with confidential correspondence was simply dangerous. I couldn't count how many times I'd been jumped by those seeking dirt on the madam, and it wasn't as if I'd gotten away unharmed every time. Servitude and violence were inseparably linked.

All this to say, they needed to be able to hold their own in a fight and carry themselves with good grace in front of high-class company as a matter of course; from there, they still needed to learn to read the madam's unspoken plans and act accordingly. With qualifications like those, I felt it was fair to call their training a "regimen" and not some general education.

When I thought about how I would soon be freed from the restrictive world of the upper class, my mind cleared up like I'd just hopped out of a lovely bath. For as far-reaching as high society was, it truly was a tiny bubble. No matter how hard I tried to shrivel up and stay out of sight, it was hard to find any breathing room as a lowborn boy—the fourth son of a farmer was about on par with a singular ant—serving an emergent and prominent noble. It was worse than how I felt around the College, where I was all but an outsider loitering around the campus. I was convinced that not even the most sinister corporation on Earth would have felt *this* refreshing to quit.

I kept to myself in the corner with thoughts like, *Ooh, I can't wait,* bouncing around my head, when an exceedingly subtle presence began creeping toward me.

I slid to one side of my usual couch—the other servants were always too busy making connections to sit down—and a body slunk into the large space I'd left open.

"Good evening."

"It is quite a nice evening indeed."

Though I'd since grown used to exchanging pleasantries with her, Miss

Nakeisha was the very sepa I'd found myself in a duel to the death with just last year. As ever, her burning orange hair and olive skin gleamed with a brilliant luster, yet her well-proportioned features remained difficult to keep in the mind, in part thanks to how expressionless they were. But most striking of all were the three arms I'd cut clean off: there they were, filling out a stately servant's uniform.

In a twist of unadulterated luxury, she had been surgically healed and returned to the battlefield a piddling two months after our fight. I'd known limbs could be magically reattached, but seeing it done so perfectly had astonished me. I hadn't been sure whether I ought to be afraid that powerful enemies would continue to reappear so long as they drew breath and had the money for iatrurgy, or to be reassured that the madam could foot the bill for me should anything happen.

"What a coincidence," I said. "To think the madam would end up sharing a table with Marquis Donnersmarck two weeks in a row."

"These conferences deal in matters of road maintenance and highway construction, as I'm sure you know. Perhaps our allegiances to fiscally savvy masters has led us to this curious twist of fate."

If we wanted to settle things once and for all, one of us would need to carve out the other's heart or lop off their head. Yet as mind-boggling as the state of our rivalry was, I'd ended up getting along with her sooner than imagined.

Frankly, she was right: these "economic conferences"—which was really just a fancy way of saying "banquets"—like the one Lady Agrippina was attending tonight were, as the name implied, nigh mandatory for two nobles whose main avenue to power lay in wealth. Whether we liked it or not, we'd been destined to meet often.

Plus, despite facing off in combat harsh enough to erase a manor and summon some kind of mythical beast, the two of them had sniffed out gains to be had from an alliance and had positioned themselves accordingly. I didn't know whether it was more a product of that scoundrel's audacity or the marquis's unyielding courage, but somehow they managed to keep up airs.

With our masters' interests aligned, Miss Nakeisha and I had become fellow

agents—uh, well, I was still just a servant—in the field. That we had to let our bloody history be water under the bridge and consider one another allies showed the depth of sin that pervaded this cutthroat world of opulence.

As you can likely surmise from our having exchanged names, we were on fine terms now; we'd even taken up arms together in some less-than-reputable work.

The patrician willingness to bare one's heart and link arms with a former enemy in the name of profit was alien to me, but I digress. Figuring that the cold shoulder wasn't necessary if we weren't going to fight, I'd opened up enough to trade intel with her when I had time to kill in the waiting room.

Obviously, both of us only ever shared harmless statements devoid of intrigue while trying to lead the other into divulging something—anything at all. Although this was far from what I was willing to define as a *proper* friendship, I'd come to the conclusion in our time together that she wasn't a bad person.

Miss Nakeisha was, at her core, a deeply dangerous individual. However, of all the people in my life, she was probably the fourth most reasonable human being I knew; having a conversation with her wasn't impossible so long as I thought about the topics. We were close enough to know what each other's favorite food was and the like, but our relationship remained strained by the perennial possibility that one of our employers would order the other's assassination at any given moment.

"By the way," she said, "I happened to hear a rumor. They say you've been granted a leave."

Seems word travels fast. Though my first instinct was apprehensive, it wasn't as if I was actively hiding the news. Anyone with an information network as expansive as Marquis Donnersmarck's was sure to know; even those who just barely participated in Ubiorum faction affairs were aware. Her statement almost certainly wasn't a veiled threat about information leaking.

Besides, I was finally going to be free of the sinking muck that was high society. Talking about my future with a friend—on paper, at least—was fine, so long as I didn't say anything that would hurt the madam's position.

And honestly, I had a sneaking suspicion that we would meet again.

After all, Lady Agrippina had offered to have me sworn in as a knight or to adopt me to eventually take the Ubiorum name. If she was willing to throw aside her shame to make these ridiculous offers, there was no doubt in my mind that she'd slip a chain around my ankle as I walked out the door. This was a given: sooner or later, she was going to throw another abominable job my way.

With how far and wide Marquis Donnersmarck's influence stretched, I was highly likely to run into Miss Nakeisha again—as either friend or foe. I figured it wouldn't hurt to let her know the truth.

"You have heard right. Alas, I have failed to measure up to my lord's expectations, and have thus put in a word of parting."

"Is that so? Well...it seems Count Ubiorum is most difficult to satisfy."

"No, I have simply been too lacking to fulfill the madam's needs. It stands to reason that blue-blooded retainers handpicked from her own lands would be better suited for the task than an indentured servant who found his place by mere happenstance. Fate is such a curious thing, isn't it?"

"Many are the toad-slayers who boast of felling dragons, but I had surely thought none to claim their sea serpent a mere fish caught. Remaining calm in the face of such humor is a challenge indeed."

In spite of her claims, Miss Nakeisha's expression was frozen in the same rock-solid poker face as usual. Seeing her speak without moving her mouth in the slightest never got any less disturbing, and hearing her engage in flowery flights of rhetoric made it less comforting still.

"Well then," she said, "have you already decided where you shall go?"

"I have. With a leave of absence as long as mine, I plan to first return to my hometown. I will spend some time offering myself to my parents as a good son does, and from there, I will set out to realize my childhood dream."

"And whatever might that be?"

"To become an adventurer."

My blunt and honest answer managed to twist—er, loosen?—her stone-cold

expression. I couldn't tell whether the emotion coming through was one of confusion or astonishment, but either way I felt like I'd won in some small way.

"That is a rather curious choice of vocation."

"From the very start, I have been no more than a dumb brat, taken by the glory that may await if only I hone myself with but a lone sword on my back."

"Glory? Is the station of personal blade to the woman shaping this generation not enough?"

"I suppose a lady would not understand." I knew I could only get away with saying such things because of the era, but sue me: I really believed that there were some feelings that were exclusively gendered. "I want to be the strongest in the world—every boy has dreamed of it once in his life. I'd like to try and make it a reality."

As I'd suspected she might, Miss Nakeisha unveiled yet another new expression: one that plainly read, "What the hell are you talking about?"

But let me set this straight: I was absolutely serious. I wanted a taste of what the heroes I held so dear—the ones I'd *played*—had felt. And, if all went well, they would speak my name with an epithet at the tail; minstrels would sing songs of my exploits; the children of tomorrow would mention my name when they discussed who the strongest adventurer ever to live was.

Every man dreams at least once of being the world's strongest. Who said that again? Whoever it was, it continued to tickle my heartstrings to this day. No matter how old, every man was merely a boy craving higher heights: whether as a husband, a father, or a ruler of nations, none could claim he hadn't earnestly dreamed of becoming the best. Even a servant would aim to become the greatest of butlers; if he was of common birth, he'd strive to at least be the most accomplished of his peers.

Among the creatures known as men...I admit I was a touch on the childish side: I just hadn't been able to stop playing around with swords.

"Hm," Miss Nakeisha mused. "The strongest...yes, the strongest. Put that way, I can see what you mean."

"Oh, you can?"

“Indeed. Unworthy as I am, I once was honored as the jewel of my clan and accepted the title without a hint of shame.”

What a grand epithet. She was one of the top performers of all I’d crossed blades with, though, so I was sure it was well deserved. I wasn’t planning on losing if we ever fought again, but she had the skill to kill me if the right circumstances lined up; I couldn’t underestimate her.

“But you see, just this past year, I was made to know that I am but a large fish in a small pond. Any such pride has been thoroughly shattered.”

I turned to see a cold yet fiery gaze, bordering on bloodlust. As raw emotion flooded her eyes, she cradled herself. Bringing out the second pair of arms she ordinarily hid under her short mantle, she petted them with loving melancholy.

Her fingers glided over unseen lines I knew all too well: the paths once taken by the Craving Blade.

“It was my first defeat since childhood. Naturally, the loss weighs on me.”

Aha. Despite her cool demeanor, she, too, had held ambitions—of becoming the greatest assassin in the world. What was more, it appeared that I had totally trampled over them.

I couldn’t blame her: I had won convincingly. I’d put all my enemies out of commission in a one-on-four fight, and had personally relieved her of three arms. Had she stayed to see the rest of the battle through, there was no doubt that she would’ve been tossed into a mass grave with all the other ravaged corpses littering the Liplar estate.

Which meant that, as the crusher of her dreams, I would one day have to see this matter through. That was what it meant to be a swordsman—a *warrior*.

“My congratulations. Finding a worthy opponent is no easy feat. The secret to true strength is—”

“Someone who will etch an unshakable oath into your heart: *No matter what fate may come, you alone I shall kill with these hands.* Yes?”

Uh, I was going to say “a rival to best.” I hadn’t expected my statement to be hijacked into something a thousand times more gruesome, but sure, I guess. I’d

heard that sepa tended to be aggressive people, but my goodness, was she dyed-in-the-wool. I would have never guessed that such passion blazed underneath her stony mask.

"Though," she said, shifting tone, "this is merely a hypothetical from a more violent timeline. As a lowly servant to the marquis, such decisions are a world away for me to make."

"Likewise. A mere adventurer has no business in such matters."

We lightened the mood with some less-than-subtle statements, and Miss Nakeisha suddenly put a right hand to her chin in contemplation.

"Come to think of it, I've also heard that Count Ubiorum has another pet project in the works: a wandering troupe dedicated to collecting rare tomes and fables... Those fonder of gossip than I mentioned the possibility of it being a reconnaissance unit, and—ahh. Of course, of course."

"...Uh, Miss Nakeisha?"

"The adventurer and the book collectors, both sent to roam. Of course—ah, yes, of course."

Hey, um, you're not making this weird, right? You know this is just Lady Agrippina's way of funneling her massive treasury into something she actually finds fun to blow off steam, right? We're all on the same page that this is just the obsession of a bibliomaniac who wants to hoard any and every story that might not spread or be preserved without her efforts...right?

I had *personally* been involved in the project, and could guarantee beyond a shadow of a doubt that the madam's book-searching party was just that. Even if they were undercover spies, why would we have forged a *more overt* post to that end? This wasn't even prime material for future history buffs and what-if theorizers to speculate over.

"Oh, don't mind me. No need to comment—I'm simply thinking aloud. It would seem I have much to look forward to."

"Wait, listen to—"

"Congratulations on your promotion, from the bottom of my heart."

From the looks of it, Miss Nakeisha had legitimately convinced herself of this strange misunderstanding. In her mind, I guess I was stepping down from my public position to focus on Ubiorum tasks under the table.

Huh. Maybe if you spend your whole life head-deep in a world where motives are more ulterior than not, you end up reading too deep into everything. My internal response was calm, but looking at this rationally, I had reason to suspect this was a really bad sign. Marquis Donnersmarck likely had scouts in every corner of the Empire; I would lose it if they watched and misinterpreted my every move.

"No, you don't understand. My contract simply expired, and I took the chance __"

"The next time we meet will surely be in the shadows. Until then."

Unfortunately, she refused to listen and stood up. It was around the time Marquis Donnersmarck usually retired, meaning she was about to leave the palace.

I reached out to stop her but ended up pawing at air; instead, she marked our farewell with a smile. It was a distinctly sepa smile: her two large mandibles peeked out without reserve.

As the door silently shut behind her, I stood frozen with one thought dominating my mind: *This is* definitely *not good.*

After all, the message behind her chittering jaw had been clear as day: *"Next time, you die."*

So, um...basically, I felt like I had a genuine excuse as to why I didn't respond to Lady Agrippina's telepathy immediately; she would have to forgive me this once.

[Tips] Many groups in history have used their nominal harmlessness in service of reconnaissance. For example, in the Trialist Empire, one department of the imperial road conservation committee has turned its offices into the bases from which noble informants operate—large-scale organizations with massive reach are often best suited for providing cover.

Upon boarding the carriage home, my master wrenched the phony smile off her face to unveil a horrendous mood.

“Did something happen?” I asked.

“That smirking shitstain managed to swipe away a public project I’d been eyeing,” Lady Agrippina sighed. “I’m still one or two paces behind when it comes to logistical power.”

Apparently, she’d lost her political spat with Marquis Donnersmarck today. He was an ancient powerhouse who’d built up his fortune since the time of the Empire’s founding; while the madam wouldn’t lose in a contest for which she was perfectly prepared, avoiding every loss in noble politics was impossible. This time, she’d challenged him at his own game, and the results reflected that.

“Things were progressing smoothly at first; one of my subordinates nearly clinched the offer, but he lost a duel—and with it, the ability to stand his ground. Trying to utilize lesser lords coddled by a land without threats is so tiresome...”

“Er, is that how the bidding for public projects is supposed to work?”

How odd. I could have sworn that this was a country run by straitlaced, highly regulatory bureaucrats; I wondered why they’d settled things with the equivalent of ramming two construction vehicles into each other to see who would get the bid. As far as I knew, once an offer was sealed, that was it. Why had they scheduled one-on-one combat after that? Did they all have chronic duel syndrome or something?

“Alas, a duel properly set in writing is a legally binding procedure.” After a short pause, she abandoned the explanatory tone and spat, “Blithering idiot—such senseless greed. I’ll need to expedite the replacement of these useless fools. I can’t have my plans topple over for such absurd reasons.”

Although we’d finished propping up the people immediately around her, the rotten cesspool that was the Ubiorum county was too much to have converted into a solid foundation in the madam’s short tenure since inauguration.

We’d gone ahead and picked out three particularly unsalvageable families—mired in reports of human trafficking and sale of highly illicit powders, so to

speak—to crush whole: the heads of household and all direct heirs were put to death, and all relatives up to the *fifth* degree were fired from imperial employment and exiled. The whole affair had helped to quiet things down, but the issue of the sheer incompetence that pervaded the territory was harder to tackle.

Waiting until each of her lackeys produced a capable heir out of sheer dumb luck was too slow, even for a methuselah. Plans to replace the ineffective pieces with talent were in the works, but the process was long. At its shortest, Lady Agrippina's predicament would continue on for a quarter of a century.

"Maybe I should've killed him when I had the chance," she grumbled.

Weighing on matters of life and death with all the pomp of someone who'd missed a good deal at the grocery store was villainy itself, but the horses neither knew nor cared. They made quick work of the short ride to the College, and we were back in home territory in minutes.

I passed the Dioscuri off to the stablehand and we went down to the atelier, where I stopped to check my personal mailbox. I'd only been out for half a day, and there was already enough mail that I had to carry it out with two hands. I would need to sort out the imperial notices from personal letters from peers and subordinates, but the task jumped out of my mind when I entered the laboratory and came across an angel.

"How do I look, Dear Brother?"

Clad in a trendy robe that flared slightly at the hem, the girl in front of me was adorable enough to mistake for a heavenly messenger—my beloved baby sister had come to greet me with a smile.

The black silk of her robe was glossy enough to seem wet, loudly announcing its superior make. The front of her collar draped onto her chest in the vein of a gorgeous evening gown, but the overall design remained tasteful enough for a student to wear; every inch of the garment spoke to the refined sensibilities of the designer and maker.

An arabesque design from the lands to our east ran across its surface, stitched in with a rare pearl-colored thread. According to the designer-cum-maker, Lady Agrippina von Ubiorum herself, the pattern outlined a unique defensive

formula.

Elisa also had on a cape cut from the same cloth; not only did it come with a trademark magus hood, but it did so in a way that avoided the dreary stigma so often associated with it. From head to upper arm, every inch it covered was embellished with embroidery or frills, making it stylish and mysterious in ways ordinary articles of fashion weren't.

"You're the cutest in the whole wide world." I voiced my unfiltered opinion. If anyone wanted to disagree, they were free to rust on the tip of Schutzwolfe.

"Thank you kindly."

Articulated in the practiced palatial tongue of a young lady, Elisa's reply was accompanied by a blossoming smile as she hugged her enrollment gift tight.

"It arrived just after you and Master left. I was so excited that I couldn't help myself and tried it on... I was worried it might not come in time."

This coming winter, Elisa would turn ten and officially enroll as a College student. She would need a uniform befitting of a magus-to-be, and her master —as well as a certain deviant who'd caught wind of the news—had prepared her one.

"I shall do my best to become a magus you can be proud of, Dear Brother."

The wand cradled in her arms glimmered as if to answer her resolution. Still a touch too big for her, our master's hand-me-down handle—according to her, it was made from a branch she'd plucked off a tree in the center of some important spiritual site—tapered off into a mystarille seat. There, a gem shimmered in intricate shades of blue to provide the finishing touch to an utterly lavish item.

Blue garnets were rare to come by, and they were said to support magical concentration and offer a blessing of justice to their wielder. Furthermore, their hue changed with the lighting; this was apparently indicative of their suitability for mutative magic.

Just thinking about its price made me want to vomit, but Lady Agrippina hadn't seemed to care one bit when she casually remarked that our patron had ponied up the whole sum.

Holy bourgeois... Here I was, pinching pennies over vegetables and salted meats; they lived in a totally different world. I swear, ever since moving to the city, my desire to seek out hammers and sickles had gone up by orders of magnitude.

“Give it your best, Elisa.”

From here on, her studies would only get harder and harder. I patted her gently on the head; when I thought about how this would be the last time in the foreseeable future I would feel this soft sensation in my hand, a sharp pain pierced through my ribs and into my heart.

“I will, Dear Brother. I’ll do my very best.” She smiled a sunny smile—one altogether foreign from the little girl clinging to our family home’s door—and placed a hand on her choker. “Because you’ll always be watching over me, won’t you?”

The kitten-blue gem in the center of her neckpiece rocked at her touch. Unlike the blue garnet, this aquamarine had come straight from Lady Agrippina’s personal collection.

From what I’d heard, Elisa had gone straight for this as her first choice for the pinnacle of her wand. Alas, it wasn’t conducive to her mystic goals and the madam shot her down. Yet she’d grown so fond of the reminiscence of my eyes that our master eventually compromised and fashioned some jewelry out of it.

That said, this wasn’t an official expense, so we were the ones footing the bill.

Lady Agrippina had done us the great favor of giving the gem up as a reward for my service as her bodyguard-slash-handyman over this past year, but trying to buy something like this outright would take entire lifetimes under normal circumstances.

Laugh at the ridiculousness of it all if you must, but precious stones were orders of magnitude more prized here than on Earth. When a single accessory could outline the difference between you and a lower noble, these sparkly rocks could become weapons like no other.

As a result, a handful of ludicrous jewels went for entire territories or even a small *country*. This aquamarine wasn’t quite on that level, but I gauged its

worth as that of at least a sizable manor: any less, and the math just wouldn't add up. The gods only knew how many times I'd cleaned up messes above an indentured servant's pay grade; if my luck were any worse than it already was, I would've died dozens of times over trying to get through this inordinate challenge—don't you dare tell me I was overselling myself.

"I'll think of this as you and do my best here in the capital. And one day, when I'm a real magus, I'll come and get you."

"I... I'll always be watching over you, Elisa. No matter how far apart we are, we'll always be together."

Shelving the awful working-life memories, I couldn't have been happier that, before anyone else, my sister had come straight to me to show off her brand-new outfit.

Because this was proof of her first step toward independence.

To regain her imperial citizenship and the freedom it conferred, Elisa would need to climb the long staircase toward magushood. Seeing her set off on her ascent with her own two feet nearly brought me to tears.

Don't cry, you dolt. Look at your sister! We both cried plenty at the farewell party, and here she is, trying to send you off with a smile and well-wishes.

I couldn't cry now—not when I knew Elisa was hurting more than me.

"Please, Dear Brother. Be safe."

"Thank you, Elisa. You do your best too, okay?"

I hugged my baby sister tight as if to squeeze down my emotions...and the girl in my arms was bigger than she had been before. The slack in my arms had shrunk with every embrace; her face no longer snuggled into my stomach, but my chest; the crown of her head grew closer each time.

I cradled her gently so as not to wrinkle her lovely robe, and she looked up at me with watery eyes. As she fought to keep those beads of sentiment contained, our father's amber irises flashed gold in the light.

Please. Let the future these eyes gaze upon be bright.

In earnest prayer, I pressed my lips to her forehead. A kiss there carried

meaning as simple as it was heartfelt: blessing.

May a path of fortune and happiness await my darling girl.

[Tips] The students of the College are mere pupils and are not recognized as magia. Yet the barrier of entry remains high: one must either be recommended by a regional magistrate, catch the eye of a professor, or pay steep tuition costs to be admitted. In exchange, they are allowed to open the gate to a realm of thaumaturgy untouchable for ordinary spellcasters.

Once initiated, ties of blood lose most of their social meaning and are replaced with meritocratic evaluation. The professors of the College take great pride in their titles; to deny the unskilled entry into their inner circles is to protect the source of that pride.

After my touching moment with Elisa, I rapidly sorted out my letters and entered the atelier proper. Much to my surprise, I found Lady Agrippina seated at her desk still in full regalia.

“Satisfied?”

“Er, yes.”

For a supposed count palatine, the table was spotless, mainly on account of her belief that delegating away enough work to avoid deathly fatigue was the mark of a good statesman—though I was sure the Emperor and his secretaries would die of pure fury if they heard that. At any rate, my master bade me sit across from her with a puff of her pipe.

Evidently, Lady Agrippina had a solid read on what had happened in the other room and had patiently waited. Not only had she noticed the traces of a delivered package, but she’d noted that her well-educated pupil had failed to greet her despite her obvious return. Her insight into others’ critical priorities, and how she danced amiably around them, was one of the worst parts about her. It wasn’t that she didn’t have a heart; she understood human emotion, but only decided to honor it according to her own whims. If they ever got in her way, a person’s most sacred values meant nothing to her.

Frankly, I would've preferred it had she been a rotten scoundrel to her core. At least then, I might've understood her.

"Here are the letters I received in my mailbox, color-coded by priority as usual."

"Thank you. I shall look through these at a later time." Putting them aside, she continued, "More to the point, I've given Elisa hers, so it shan't do not to give you your gifts as well."

"Huh?"

The unexpected turn left me blinking blankly; the madam carried on by pulling out an ornate box from her desk drawer, complete with an inlaid depiction of a mythological scene adorning the top. Pushing it my way with an Unseen Hand, the latch opened on its own.

Peering inside, I found a well-worn tobacco set—in fact, the very same set Lady Agrippina always used.

Upon a second inspection, I found that the pipe smoldering in her hands was of an unfamiliar make; the mother-of-pearl craft she'd been puffing on when we first met was right here in the box.

"You've come of age, haven't you? As trivial as the lessons were, I have been your master in magic; a gift is due, I should think. Just as the robe is an imperial marker of the magus, so too is the pipe a sign of adulthood."

The smoking culture of Rhine was not based around tobacco, but rather fragrant grasses, herbs, and wood. Many soaked their leaves in arcane potions, making the pipe equal parts luxury and medicine. Steeping the leaves in elixirs—or simply using mystic herbs to begin with—allowed for much more variation in effect than the sedative cigarettes of Earth. Magia and mages alike concocted packages to boost concentration or regain lost mana, but I'd heard that Lady Agrippina's trick of weaving spells into the smoke she exhaled was rather unique.

"You may not be a magus, but it will serve you well as a simple mage. Spellcasters of every make tend to partake; no one will question where the pipe came from."

“Thank you very much. But isn’t this your favorite?”

“I’ve landed myself in a position where it’s seen as rude not to use a gift. So that belongs to you now—it would be such a waste to let it gather dust.”

What a gift.

Oh so gingerly, I lifted the pipe out of the box. It was far lighter than I’d imagined, and as smooth as velvet to the touch. The tray inside had several compartments, each capped with a labeled lid detailing the effects of the herb stored therewithin: tranquilizers, mana boosters, and the like.

“Consider the leaves an added bonus. I shall show you how to make your own later, so do make sure to replenish your stock yourself.”

“Thank you. There’s even a recipe list...”

“I can’t provide you with enough to last forever, after all,” she said, turning away to let out another puff. Was it hubristic of me to think she did so out of embarrassment? “Oh, and that pipe has a little spell cast on it so that it can fit more leaves than it ought to.”

“Oh... No wonder. I’ve always been curious as to how you managed to smoke for so long with a pipe of this size.”

“Please. It would be such a bother to have to stuff the thing every three breaths.”

Sure, but spatial expansion was not the kind of technique meant to be casually used on a smoking tool—I was sure of *that* much.

For as familiar as it was to my eyes, having the pipe in hand drove home the consequence of what I’d been bestowed; I gazed at it in a trance, only to notice the madam looking at me with equal intensity. Apparently, she was the type who wanted to see her gifts tested as soon as she handed them out.

“May I join you?”

“Feel free.”

That was why I asked for permission to ignore the glaringly obvious rule that only peers on equal footing were to smoke together. I did as she encouraged me to, stuffing the pipe, lighting it with a cantrip, and taking a drag...only to

burst into a coughing fit as a sweet scent choked me out. I was still too young; even without tar or nicotine, my respiratory system was too sensitive for it.

This took me back to the first cigarette I'd bummed off a friend in my past life. Then, as now, I hadn't been able to enjoy its flavor; though that was partially because it was a cheap stick from a two-hundred-yen pack, I'd been too caught up in the bitter sting of smoke to understand why anyone would ever enjoy it.

"Heh heh," the madam chuckled, "it looks like it's still a little too early for you. Well, don't feel pressured to make it a habit. Just take a puff or two when you've cast too many spells for the day."

"Thank you so much."

While I was still rejoicing in my unexpected birthday gift, Lady Agrippina moved on and sent two rolls of parchment flying my way. I unraveled them in confusion, only to find that they were the deeds to Castor and Polydeukes.

"This one is an endowment from employer to servant to honor your loyal work...or at least, that's the pretense for passing the horses to you."

Upon asking her why, she answered that she'd purchased the pair long ago, and that they were coming up on ten years old. The average horse in the Empire lived somewhere between fifteen and twenty years; at ten, they were ready to be retired from their duties pulling carriages and giving rides.

This was a very privileged way of doing things, of course. Working an aging horse whose strength had begun to wane was a fast way to be mocked in noble company: "What, you can't *afford* a replacement?"

While a horse in the countryside would be expected to march until it was on its last legs, these two should have been given to a lesser lord in the madam's county for cheap or kept as studs on an Ubiorum pasture on account of their good records. However, Lady Agrippina said instead that she'd give them to me as an extra coming-of-age gift because they liked me.

Truthfully, I thought this was too much. Despite their age, they were both purebred military horses, and their output had yet to drop in the slightest. Whenever I took them outside, they ran around for long enough to tire *me* out; they were still in tip-top form.

This was like getting two imported sports cars as a present for getting into college. What was I, an oil prince?

I mean, I liked them too, but horses cost money to care for and—

“If you can’t so much as earn enough to feed two horses, then you shan’t ever find success as an adventurer. Think of this as a trial from me to you. Or what—can you not handle it?”

I’d been trying to politely decline, but the only response that came to mind after that was, “Of course I can!” If I backed down here, I was leaving myself wide open for her to tell me I didn’t have the guts to set off on my own.

Uhh, I’ll need to cover stable costs and a lot of hay... I-If I was careful, it wouldn’t be more than a drachma per year, probably. That was, um, fine. I’d need to shave their hooves, replace their horseshoes, and trim their manes every now and again, but it’d *probably* turn out okay—er, no, I would make *sure* it turned out okay.

The reality that my annual expenses were going to easily run me a gold coin put a tremble in my voice, but I was happy to accept the steeds I’d befriended. That said, I was a bit worried about what the alfar would do to them now that they were my horses in both name and fact.

“And next—”

“W-Wait, what? There’s *more*?!”

I raised my voice in shock as my master reached into her desk once more, but all that did was put a smug grin on her face as she pulled out a circular bag. Made of leather, the carrying case was branded with the emblem of an artisan union I’d seen around the capital; inside it was a singular round shield.

The wooden body was reinforced with metal plates and curved into a gentle convex shape that was capped off at the center with a rounded bit of metal meant to deflect enemy blades. Unembellished save for a layer of gray anticorrosive, the simple shield was one carried by foot soldiers marching into the chaos of a melee. Though it wouldn’t be effective to set up a coordinated front line, it was more than enough to block projectiles, and its size made it perfect in tight quarters or disorganized brawls; the design was aimed at the

common fighter.

At the same time, it was incredibly well made. Though the grip in the center of the backside was straightforward, it was made of solid metal instead of a flimsy leather strap. On top of that, there was a secondary grip off to the side with a complementary strap to fasten the whole thing tight to one's forearm. The dual handles added versatility, and their placement had been carefully adjusted so neither got in the way of the other.

Hrm, this understated design paired with a deliberate focus on utility told me that this was a product far more expensive than it initially let on.

The madam beckoned me to pick it up; I obliged. Betraying my expectations, the shield was light in my hand; it was only light from the perspective of a physically capable person, of course, but this wouldn't be too much weight for a long march.

More conveniently still, it wouldn't get in the way of my single-handed sword bonuses, thanks to Hybrid Sword Arts' propensity for making full use of every weapon on the battlefield. I may not have had any shield-based add-ons, but it wouldn't hurt to add it to my setup.

Shields weren't just defensive tools: just as they could block an incoming spearhead or arrow, they could also knock away a sword or spear guarding an enemy's vitals. If the need arose, they could also be turned into blunt weapons with a well-timed bash.

"This shield is a parting gift...and also an assignment."

"An assignment?" I'd been thoroughly looking the thing over, and had just tried gripping it when Lady Agrippina suddenly broke the silence.

"Erich, if you're going to be an adventurer, then you must hide your magic as best you can."

"To conceal my background?"

"No. I've been watching you fight for quite some time now, and it's clear to me that you use your spells much too frivolously."

I didn't think I'd been haphazard enough to warrant a scolding, but my master

raised her pointer finger in a teacherly fashion and sincerely laid out her reasoning.

In essence, she wanted to say that my style of combat was one hardly seen in the Empire, and the rarity of my methods inherently gave me the element of surprise; thus, it was best to keep that edge hidden. She wasn't telling me *not* to use magic: my master's advice was to apply my mystic talents in ways that couldn't be easily discerned at a glance.

"Your skill with the blade is enough to convince anyone of a long dedication to swordplay. As such, your enemies will naturally presume that you aren't a mage. Don't you think it wasteful to throw out an opening so ripe for exploitation from the start?"

I supposed I saw her point. If I were up against a meat-for-brains warrior-type and they suddenly started tossing around spells, I'd definitely get a little scared. The surprise could make me slower to react, and an overabundance of wariness could leave me unable to fight back properly.

"Always look for the decisive moment, and save your hand until then. Once a foe knows your mystic potential, they will act accordingly. Tell me: if you were to fight a perfect replica of yourself, would you let things drag into a stalemate?"

"Absolutely not."

Obviously, a clone of me would know all my tricks; I would never consider a fair fight. If it came down to a one-on-one battle, I would use everything at my disposal—namely, extra swords and the crossbows I'd been using since looting them a year ago—to end things as quickly as I could. Rather, I'd done so many a time. While I pitied the honest warriors who'd polished their skills to the point where they could hold their own against a normal mage, I wasn't sorry for mopping them up quickly with my fastest clearing strategy.

"I understand wanting to perfect your craft by culling the rabble, but your current usage of magic is undeniably wanting. I can recall more than a handful of occasions where you ran into a skilled warrior who caused you trouble as they danced around your magic."

"...It is as you say."

Looking back, she was right. Every so often, I'd found myself breezing through an initial wave of hitmen only to be dragged into a prolonged struggle against the real killer lurking behind.

After all, if you knew a spell was coming, there were plenty of ways to get around it. Every spell came with some amount of casting time, and anything that had to target a person or the space around them was definitionally evadable. Just like how I read my enemies' lines of sight to dodge their arrows on the daily, sorcery wasn't any better if its intention was obvious.

Evasion wasn't even the only option. Skirting a caster's range could cause them to shoot blanks; taking cover could break a targeting formula; a well-placed shield could soften the blow. Even off the top of my head, the counterplay was limitless.

Only College professors and particularly noteworthy priests walked around with I-Win spells and miracles in their back pockets. The difference between "You die if this hits" and "You die if I finish casting" was immense; I would do well not to forget that. Creatures could guarantee victory upon attack all they wanted—it meant nothing without the precious words "can't be countered."

"Whether in combat or politics, to be unknown is the greatest strength; to not know is the most terrible fear. Remember that and carry yourself smartly."

For magia, violence was a matter of efficiency; instant and incomprehensible murder was key. Lady Leizniz's lecture on Daybreak polemurge philosophy naturally came to mind. She had taught me similarly grisly ideas with a saintlike smile: the most important thing was to kill before the enemy could process their own death.

"Informal as it was, I have been your master and teacher. Consider this advice my last gift to you as a servant and pupil: a more brutal approach is within your reach, and you may as well take the chance to grab it."

"Did you *have* to word it that way?"

"Oh, don't tell me you aren't aware of how unethical you already are."

Her wicked grin told me she was having fun teasing me, but I personally couldn't recount anything particularly dirty I'd done. Even at my lowest, my

antics were on the level of maxing out my mind and Hands to tie a bunch of shoelaces together, pulling enemies into their allies' swings, and unbuckling belts to give them some breathability when I was feeling lazy. Other than that, I'd developed a strong combo with easy-to-handle daggers that could constantly skewer someone from seven directions at a time, but I wouldn't call that *unethical*.

To me, that word was reserved for something so ludicrously unfair that the victim didn't even get a chance to roll for a reaction. If I were so overpowered that I could publicize all my secrets and document all my stats and *still* manage to get a fellow munchkin to question how they'd ever kill me, *then* we'd be talking.

So basically, when I was at the level where I could beat Lady Agrippina in a fair fight.

I wasn't even close.

"'A parlor trick caught on to attracts no crowds.' Of all the proverbs those musky hermits of First Light conjure up, this is the only one you should take to heart. Engrave it deep in your mind."

The showy sneer, the mischievous tone, and the sweet scent of smoke—I'd grown used to them all, and now they came together to weave a statement of farewell.

[Tips] Pipes in the Empire are not stuffed with tobacco as they are on Earth, but with fragrant herbs often adjusted to have medicinal properties. Originally only employed by witch doctors to cure maladies of the throat and lungs, the advancement of magecraft as a study led to the discovery of a great many other potential uses. In the western reach of the Central Continent, they are considered a mark of independence or the tool of a mage.

The trend is particularly popular among the gentry, some of whom keep climate-controlled storage facilities to foster the most aromatic leaves. Yet while the upper-class image of the pastime remains, many common folk partake for the health benefits as well.

As I packed up all my gifts and began preparing to leave, I heard something that I seldom ever heard.

“Oops.”

I’d spent a good portion of my life serving Lady Agrippina, but rare were the occasions when she let herself seem slow of wit.

I turned around and asked whether something was the matter, and for once, her response was an awkward one. She scratched at her hair in embarrassment and showed me a small box in her palm.

“I’ve done it now—I’ve butchered the order. I was supposed to give you this first, now that it’s ready.”

“Huh? *Another* gift?”

“Ugh, how embarrassing. If I were in the audience for a play like this, I would definitely be complaining. Ah, well, fine. Here, take this with you.”

For all the sentimental buildup, the madam carelessly tossed it my way. Opening it with a doubtful eye, I discovered a pedestal wrapped in thick woolen cloth, and a ring seated within.

It wasn’t particularly ornate, nor did it house a gem; it was just a plain old ring. If there was anything worthy of special mention, it would be how the artificially induced afternoon sun pouring in from the windows glimmered off the golden surface with a flirtatious sparkle. This was no gilded specimen: the weight in my palm commanded tremendous presence and clearly declared its purity.

Looking closer, though, I noticed that it had a thin engraving: an Ubiorum crest, though a touch too small to use as an official seal.

“A sword, scepter, and double-headed eagle... Wait a second, this is—”

“A substitute for your letter of commendation. I suspect it arrived with your sister’s robes. I wish I’d noticed sooner.”

On the inside of the ring were the words, *From Count Agrippina von Ubiorum to Erich of Konigstuhl—in honor of his distinguished service.* Engraved with elegant penmanship, the commendation the madam had mentioned was

basically a “good job, you did it” award.

“Are you sure?” I asked.

“My standing will drop if I *don’t* hand you something like this. Be a good boy and take it.”

However, this was no mere show of gratitude. This wasn’t some employee-of-the-month award; it was something worth putting on a résumé—no, it was a résumé in and of itself.

When a commoner wished to serve a lord, they had to prove two things. The skills for the job weren’t enough: one had to show that they were of good character. Nobody wanted to bring someone neither fish nor fowl into their inner circles and risk catastrophe. Wanting some proof of identity was a natural next step.

In rural cantons, the churches kept family registries; in cities, the greater administrative state collected census data; letters of commendation were forms of identification considered to be just as valid as these. They were clear statements made by the nobles or knights issuing them, to the effect that the recipient had done well in their service.

Someone with a formal commendation could walk up to any of their benefactor’s allies and expect not only food and lodging, but most likely even equipment and money to facilitate a journey. Meanwhile, showing it to an unrelated noble was sure to boost one’s odds of being hired by leaps and bounds.

Kings and lords of every make were wont to give them out to those who braved great challenges to solve their issues. Whether as a sword or a ring, it wasn’t all that surprising I’d received one, considering my accomplishments.

But the hefty weight in my hand felt to me like a delicate bomb just waiting to go off.

“Um, do I—er—*have* to take it?”

“Yes.”

Sporting a great big grin, the scoundrel replied without missing a beat; she

wasn't so cute as to stop and ponder why I might try and refuse.

You see, just *owning* this thing was enough to clarify that I was related to Lady Agrippina in some way. At some point this thing was going to lead me into "You must be working for *her*!" territory.

So why not throw it away? Or why not sell it? These were nonoptions. Nominally though it was, callously handling a gift benevolently bestowed by my direct master was to give her ammunition to do gods knew what.

Dishonor—this single word was reason enough to sever skull from spine. Rejecting a superior's sincerity was explicitly against the rules. She could've handed me an avant-garde work of pottery for all society cared; I would still have to take it home and treasure it as a family heirloom.

I hated it. I just knew that, somewhere down the line, her scheming calculations used me as a variable. Any occasion where clarifying my connection to Lady Agrippina was a boon was necessarily going to be some terrible scene of carnage. And if I found myself in such an occasion, I was certainly not going to be enjoying myself.

This was a golden ticket for the express train to hell. All I could do was pray that it wasn't a one-way fare.

"It won't hurt you if you use it properly," the madam chided. "Take care of it."

"Well...I'll pray that I won't have to use it."

"Come now, don't you think it'll be convenient to have it on hand if you ever get sick of adventuring and decide to come back?"

"Excuse me?"

"Arrogant clients, impossible requests from out-of-touch nobles, cheapskates who haggle after the work is done, cheap foods with flavorless wines, days upon days without a bath, and tasks as monotonous as they are bloody... I hear many an adventurer grows disillusioned by the rift between fantasy and reality and gives up altogether."

It was a common-enough tale. Adventurers were pawns that a strategist need not think twice to sacrifice; we were the first to be thrown at any problem that

seemed like a pain to solve. For every hero magnified in the minstrels' songs, there were dozens of nameless corpses forgotten by the wayside, and hundreds more menial tasks not worthy of remark.

This may have been an occupation the sentient races had first developed in covenant with the gods, but the words rang hollow if historical glory turned out to be all that remained in a decaying shell.

Not a few prospective adventurers had had their wills shattered in the face of this revelation; just as many had died trying to overcome it. One day, when the thin crutch of yearning snapped under my arm, would I regret not having chosen the life of court service? I couldn't promise now that I wouldn't eventually end up groveling on the ground, cursing the very idea of adventure...but what I could swear was that I wasn't the kind of spineless coward to give up because of the boring corners I couldn't cut.

More importantly, I genuinely doubted any of the tribulations Lady Agrippina had listed could come close to overtaking the torture that had been this past year of work.

Who cared whether the food was lavish when fatigue rendered my tongue unusable? Wine dated and sourced to an infamously good batch was worth less than sewage if I could never tell what had been mixed in. The fluffiest spring-loaded beds were just the sites of another attack; I could never truly relax even in a wonderfully sumptuous bath.

So how could hardship of my *own* making be any worse? Simple stews and porridges made from huddling over a campfire and sleeping bags laid over the hard ground sounded luxurious enough to me, so long as they came with the reprieve to enjoy them.

"I just hate to see a good piece go," the madam said. "You know how convoluted the talks over where to source the new arsenal of aeroships have gotten, don't you?"

I did know. I was something of an insider, and I did have a thing or two to say about the brouhaha that was aeroship development.

Namely, *of course* everyone was arguing. This was a project to decide the future of all Rhine; in no world was the noble sphere going to stay silent with

the crown looking to establish a large-scale manufacturing headquarters. While I understood the need to upgrade from a tiny testing grounds to a more powerful facility capable of repairs and modifications, the bundle of authority that came with having such a site within one's own borders meant that only a fool *wouldn't* lay claim to it.

The final specifications called for twenty vessels to be stationed across the Empire over half a century, but there were only to be three production plants to supply them. The prospect of having centuries of prosperity guaranteed was impossible to resist. Local steel and timber industries would be propped up on the Emperor's dime; talented labor was sure to follow; the merchants would come after them to capitalize on a greater market demand.

Just how much free tax money could one factory generate in a year?

High society had already devolved into a free-for-all for the rights to host them. One of them was all but sure to be constructed in the Ubiorum county on account of the madam's heading the entire project, but the other two were fair game. Ambitious to their core, the members of His Majesty's bulwark had begun to buzz; it was as if *not* lusting over potential advancements was shameful to them.

In fact, I was convinced that the greater part of the letters I'd found in my personal inbox were requests concerning this very topic.

"So just know that I shall welcome you with open arms should you ever wish to return, Erich. Perhaps I'll leave the seat of personal knight empty in case you ever change your mind—or would you prefer a more secretarial position? I *do* have such an abundance of those that needs to be filled."

I put on the brightest smile I'd ever had in all my life and answered, "Not a chance in hell."

"Is that so. How terribly disappointing...but I suppose I shall patiently wait. Ah, but one more thing."

"Yes?"

"Don't forget..." Lady Agrippina stripped her voice of all its play and whispered in a low growl that slithered up from the ground and into my ears,

wriggling deep into my brain. “You *owe* me.”

The madam still had that favor in her back pocket. She wasn’t going to use it—no, just sit on it—and she was even going to let me leave the capital.

Nothing could scare me more.

I had a feeling that my freedom was just a flight of fancy for her: she probably thought I’d be more entertaining this way, and that she could use whatever trouble I got myself into to her advantage. At the end of it all, Lady Agrippina had managed to mark our parting with something that weighed even heavier than the golden ring. *Argh—just use the stupid favor and let me be free, dammit!*

[Tips] Favors are a currency in which an equivalent exchange can hardly ever be made. Cashed in at an opportune moment, a simple IOU can return several times the value of whatever action initiated the loan to begin with—a lesson worth remembering. After all, there are no laws or regulations to protect a debtor when it comes to such intangible assets.

As soon as I’d finished packing up at home, I would be fully prepared to set off—not even my workplace devoid of rights would force me to keep toiling until the very last minute. In just a few short days, I would be putting the capital behind me.

My goodbyes were said: we’d all decided not to meet on the fateful day. It was a kindness on their end to not add more baggage as I set off; it was a desperate attempt to give myself a final push on mine.

“Three years...”

Looking back, it had been a long road, albeit ludicrously short in the context of a servant earning his sister’s tuition. A normal person would have to work until their legs could no longer carry their own weight to earn the dozens of drachmae I had, and even my initial hopes had been in the ballpark of five years. In a more objective light, my time here had been staggeringly short. Everyone back in Konigstuhl would certainly be surprised...

But not as surprised as she whom I had sworn to return for.

Walking along at a brisk pace, I felt not only the capital, but the College tugging at my heartstrings. Yet again, I'd lost sight of the bad as soon as the struggle was past—I really did need to work on that.

I walked out of the Krahenschanze gates, letting the knowledge that this would be the last time settle in. The stables were manned all throughout the night in case of emergency, so I swung by to tell the usual watchman that I'd officially been entrusted with Castor and Polydeukes; his congratulations were nearly loud enough to wake the horses. The folks working here spent a lot of time with animals, after all. Having seen good owners and bad owners, they were sure to be excited to hear about someone being rewarded for getting along with their steeds. I told him that I'd be back to pick the pair up on the day of my departure and asked for a nice saddle before heading home.

But along the way, I noticed something. I saw alfar sprinkling autumn leaves, leaving a charming trail in their wake; antsy fairies already scouting out where to lay their frost; and wind-borne fey scuffling over the dull warmth of summer and the cool of fall.

Yet none of them paid me any mind.

Come to think of it, I felt like the constant barrage of pranks had largely gone quiet around the time the Ubiorum business really started to kick off. I'd noted that I didn't have to untangle my head in a frenzy as often, but hadn't given it much thought until now.

"Welcome home."

"You're back!"

"Oh, hey, you two. I'm home."

I opened my front door with these thoughts on my mind, only to be greeted by Ursula and Lottie rolling around on my bed. With the false moon waxing, the svartalf was the same human size she'd been when I'd first met her, with the sylphid sprawled out across her smooth stomach.

The only change to their appearances would be the golden anklet around Ursula's left foot and the similarly lustrous trimming on Lottie's spring-green

dress. Some fey artisanry had turned my lockets of hair into personal accessories, and if their constant usage was any indication, the two of them had taken a liking to them.

“What’s the matter, Beloved One? It isn’t like you to stare.” In a mischievous tone, Ursula added, “Are you in the mood for a dance, perhaps?”

I’d met them right after leaving Konigstuhl: that meant our history went three years back too. I’d been terrified of them back then. While I still couldn’t let my guard down, ours had turned into a comfortable relationship.

“No,” I said. “I was just thinking that we’ve been through a lot together since we first met.”

“Is that so? The sensibilities of the mortal world perplex me. I don’t think it’s been all that long.”

“Mm... Me too! Lottie feels like we just met!”

“Don’t lump me together with you, Miss I-Sleep-For-Decades.”

“Ursula, you meanie!”

Their takes on the matter were apt for life-forms prone to burning decades to dance a single tune. For a mensch who greeted friends with “Long time no see” after a week or two, their perspective was difficult to truly grasp.

“But now that you mention it, perhaps you’re right. You’ve grown so big, after all.”

“You think?”

Personally, I really needed to *keep* growing. Receiving a comment on my growth from the very beings that were working to invalidate the experience I’d put into physique came off as rather sarcastic.

Still, it finally made the pieces click: no wonder the alfar had eased up on their mischief.

“What’s the matter? Your face is all scrunched up.”

“I realized you’re right, is all. I have gotten bigger, and to prove it, the other fairies haven’t bothered me much lately.”

“My, don’t tell me you’ve only just noticed.”

“I was too busy to think about it. You know as much, don’t you?”

“But of course. We alfar aren’t *supposed* to understand the meaning of diligence, but I’ve learned as of late. Isn’t that right?”

“It was sooo tirey...”

I genuinely felt bad about having made them help with my horrendous ordeal, but I’d paid my dues in full. Not only had I bought them a pricey mead, but I’d fetched water from a natural spring and purified it with seven nights’ moonlight just as a diluent; that had been backbreaking work.

Though I had to admit, that was a perfectly reasonable request by fey standards. They never tried to whisk me to the twilit hill, nor did they demand I give up the crux of what made me human—maybe “reasonable” was *under*selling it. In fact, those fey eyes I’d declined to take because of an ill omen could have easily been forced upon me, and that would certainly have been enough to derail me from my mensch path.

I was fifteen. An adult among my peers, I should have seemed past my prime to fairies infatuated with children and babes. The pranks had begun to dwindle, and few alfar came to speak with me nowadays. I wasn’t completely looked over on account of my youthful—I didn’t really like the word childish—appearance, but who knew how long that would last?

“Will you two...grow bored of me?”

The unease in my heart brought forth a naked question. Over these three years, they had accompanied me onto countless battlefields and saved my life more times than I could count; growing attached to them was a matter of course. And to be cast away by someone you care about is so very painful.

“Bored? Hmm, *bored*...”

The midnight fairy fluttered her moon-moth wings and gently lifted off from the bed. With her usual imperceptible movement, she closed the distance and put both hands on my cheeks. Meanwhile, the sylphid had plonked herself down on the bed frame with a quizzical expression.

“True, you have grown, Beloved One.”

Pulling herself into a range where our breaths intertwined, Ursula hadn’t changed a bit from that first night: not her smooth and dusky skin, nor her shimmering orphic wings, nor the scarlet eyes that put Lady Agrippina’s gems to shame. My heart pounded as I felt myself falling into the abyss of the False Moon.

“Look at this defined jaw: you’ve grown up. What were once well-kept arms and legs have become the limbs of a fighter—of a man. Your shoulders are broader and your stomach is hard. We can’t call you a little boy anymore.”

She was right. Puberty had hit, and I was closer to an adult than a child. While the alfar had minimized my more masculine traits, I was now a fully functioning man. The world saw me as young, but not a child: I was now mature in both name and fact, sure to lose the interest of my fey admirers.

“But listen well, Beloved One. We may not be queens, but we are *named*. High-order alfar are much more complex and much more simple than you can know.”

Her hands loosened, gliding just close enough to my skin to tickle my peach fuzz. She outlined the contour of my eyes, pressed a finger against my lips, patted my hair, and slid a hand across my neck. As she traced the shape of me, it felt more as though she was caressing a formless something that hid within my physical frame.

“‘Alfar bewitch the children they fancy.’ Is this what you think? The truth is that *we* are ever the ones first to be bewitched.”

To bewitch was to attract or fascinate, but it carried the connotation of supernatural enchantment. The order she’d put forth was sound: why else would the children of man themselves be bewitched, spirited away, and feasted upon? It seemed this spellbound spirit had no intention of giving up her mark.

“What a truly puzzling soul: at once adult and child, underhanded yet pure and innocent. It’s as if I’m looking at a boy who’s fallen asleep in the middle of his bedtime story, his mind still racing with heroic adventure.”

My heart skipped a beat. I hadn’t spoken about my past life nor the future

Buddha who had sent me here. But the alfar dealt in concepts, and my soul was free for them to see. Reborn in a child's body, I had fostered what had once been a fleeting dream into maniacal yearning.

"The alfar who have chosen you did so because of this warped yet beautiful soul. This hair the color of flowing mead and these eyes brighter than shimmering lakes are lovely, of course, but they were never the main draw."

"Huh... So I'm surrounded by a bunch of eccentrics?"

"How rude. The word you're looking for is 'connoisseurs,' my little curiosity."

The dim candlelight paired with her smirk terribly well. With a giggle, she grasped my face again and placed her lips on my eyelid.

"One day, this hair shall fade to the pale silver of the moon; these eyes will lose their luster; this skin will be pocked with spots. But so long as that soul of yours remains the same, we will remain bewitched forever, Beloved One."

"Yup! But I'll do my bestest to keep you pretty!"

"...I see. I'll do my best to not let you down."

I think that a soul ages with resignation. If growth is a part of maturation—a step closer toward finality—then the emotional growth of accepting reality for what it is must be maturity of the soul.

I was still dreaming a silly dream of making it on my own with nothing but a blade to my name. Most hit the brick wall of reality: whether it was the low pay or the infrequent work, there were plenty of opportunities to wake up to the fact that adventuring was just nomadic busywork in disguise.

If patching up broken ambitions and propping them up in more reasonable places was what adults did, then I was still a dumb brat—an old one, at that. Counting my last life, I was closing in on fifty. Even accounting for my body's effects on my mental state, I was a pretty pathetic excuse for a man.

But I was fine with that so long as I had people around me who accepted me for who I was—but most of all, so long as this life fulfilled me.

That's really what life is about, in the end: can you die happy with the way you lived? Passing on without regrets tugging at the back of your mind is the

best way to go.

So, to leave nothing undone, I was going to chase these fantasies. They'd been chiseled into stone over years and years, and I wouldn't let anyone deny me them: not even a heartbroken future me.

"Thank you and do your best, Beloved One. May you remain your lovely self forever."

"Aww, people are so nice. You change, but you don't, and it's cute how you stop being cute! That's why we want you to be cute forever."

"Exactly. Complexity and simplicity are difficult things. Don't ever forget the depths of our captivation. Whether bewitcher or bewitched, half-hearted measures will not do."

Ursula raised her palm, and Lottie fluttered over and landed with a twirl.

"This chat has been terrific, but the moon is sinking nicely. Perhaps now would be a good time to go gloat over our fun to the others."

"Whaaa? But won't we get in trouble again?"

"It'll be fine. A touch of envy is good medicine to remind the elders of their youths."

"If you're gonna get in trouble, leave Lottie out of it."

"What a heartless friend you are. And I saved you from being locked away too."

"Nuh-*uh*. Lottie was napping!"

Engaged in merry chatter, the alfar melted into the shadows in the corner of the room. As they vanished, our entire conversation began to feel like it had been a mirage.

"Thank you both."

I really had come a long way from the days I'd spent cowering over the thought that they might kidnap me. But, well, if I wanted to stay in their good graces, the first step was going to be getting home safe and sound.

[Tips] Mortals monger fear in hushed whispers about bewitching spirits, but in truth, those who are whisked away are invariably possessed of a quality much the same as their captors.

One of tabletop gaming's greatest charms is the collection of minor articles. Practical tools aside, little knickknacks that serve no purpose beyond role-playing are an absolute must. What video games often write off entirely, TRPGs pore over in excruciating detail—often enough to question whether the players are preparing for an *actual* camping trip. Though these elements may contribute to information overload, they can add a touch of flavor to any campaign with the right GM, if not become the main dish itself.

Ropes and lanterns may be the most well known, but flint and firestarters couldn't be forgotten either. Cooking knives, tea strainers, and mantles offering no AC had once been the heart-fluttering arsenal to line my character sheets. Trying to imagine how a PC would pack their luggage had always been a thoughtful affair: I'd asked myself many questions of whether a character would carry an item themselves or be the type to bum it off a partymate.

But it wasn't just flavor: GMs who emphasized the RP part of RPG liked to put these kinds of tools to use. Trying to camp outdoors without the proper equipment could come with all sorts of debuffs.

"You're going to drink your soup without any tableware? Roll, then. If you mess up, you're taking 1D4 burn damage."

"Wow, you came to the snowy mountains without a mantle? Let's see if you have any extra clothes to layer on... Nope. Okay, you're frostbitten—let's put a debuff on your Dexterity, shall we?"

"I mean, I guess it's fair to temporarily remove the debuff if you drink some alcohol...but you don't have *that* either! What the hell *did* you show up to do?! You're suicidal!"

I could no longer put a face to the voice echoing through my memories, but the good times I'd had at that table remained. We'd ended up passing a single paltry bowl among the whole party, forging an unbreakable bond that would go on to solidify our name as the One Cup Clan.

Nostalgia danced in the back of my mind as I finished packing the last of my things. These preparations weren't just pretend, and I'd dug into my savings to fully deck myself out now that my life depended on my readiness.

My favorite of my prejourney purchases had to be the dual-purpose knapsacks I planned on saddling the Dioscuri with. They could come off the harness if I wanted to carry one myself, and I'd gotten four of them to fit a huge amount of luggage on the road. Plus, the madam had given me a bit of instruction in antitheft enchantments—nothing fancy, mind you: all the spell I'd cast did was cut off someone's fingers if they opened one of the bags without a corresponding token. This way, I didn't have to worry about burglary if I left the horses alone for a bit, and it'd be trivial to find the culprit if anything happened.

But of course, there wouldn't be much point in a fancy bag if I didn't have anything fancy to go inside it.

I'd bought *the* archetypal tent. One rod in the center propped up a durable canvas with four pins to ground it. The quality material hadn't made it an easy buy, but bad sleep was a sure way to keep debuffs ticking; I'd taken the plunge knowing I couldn't cut corners here.

In a similar vein, I had a sleeping bag stuffed with cotton, along with two freshly made blankets that were much warmer than their thinness suggested: I'd lay one on the ground and lay the other atop my sleeping bag when it got cold. Barren earth was far cooler than one would think, and having a layer beneath me to soak up heat would certainly help once summer came.

Knowing I'd drive them into the ground, I had two pairs of boots and too many socks to count. My wardrobe was three sets of undergarments and linen travel wear; hopefully, I'd be able to avoid stinking up my journey with all these clothes.

As far as tableware went, I'd readied myself a nice set made from thin metals. One cylindrical pot housed a set of four incrementally smaller bowls, each nestled into the last. I'd fallen in love with these at first sight during a leisurely stroll through the capital. They were apparently imports from the east, but all I knew was that they were light and durable, and tickled my boyish sense of wonder. They'd seen plenty of use on my long journeys with Mika, and just

stewing together a few ingredients had always been enough to excite me with thoughts of *Now* this *is an adventure!*

Other than that, I had a few leather waterskins and a handful of medical supplies. The distilled liquor could serve as both a disinfectant for an open wound or a pick-me-up on a chilly night.

And how could I forget my solutions to Lady Agrippina's assignments? My tinderbox was fashioned with a piece of flint that had a firemaking formula etched into it so that I could pretend to light things normally; my washboard was enchanted with Clean, significantly improving how well I could wash my clothes. I couldn't see myself going back after learning how convenient magic was, so this was my way of employing it undercover. Who would've thought that my old daydreams about magical adventuring tools would come in handy a lifetime later?

To be fair, this was hardly unique to me; such fantasies came with the trade. The GM was a god open to being bargained with, and it was fun to explore every possibility when traveling under flexible heavens.

After putting away the mystic tools I'd spent the past few days toiling over, what free space remained was stuffed with Berylinian souvenirs, completing the packing process.

This time, I'd be taking the highways without any particular schedule to adhere to; I didn't need to carry that much food. In the worst case, I could always pull out a bow or crossbow—which I'd taken quite a liking to in the past year—to hunt some game anyway.

Checking to make sure I had my sewing kit, carving knife, chisel, and, most importantly, my armor, I finished my last round of inspections. With my few personal articles tidied up, my home in the low quarter hardly looked any different from when I'd first moved in; as I scanned it one last time, I took a moment to reflect.

Despite how close I'd been to accusing the madam of sending me to live in a haunted house, it had been a cozy place. I fondly reminisced on how I'd fixed the table and spent months replacing the squeaky floorboards to thank my tireless caretaker.

I made my way down the stairs, gliding my fingers across the furniture as I passed. I hadn't noticed any sign of cooking, but was awaited by a handkerchief wrapping on a freshly cleaned dining table.

Curious, I opened the package: it was sandwiches. Miscellaneous stuffing bookended by thinly sliced bread was popular throughout this part of the continent, and apparently, every country claimed that the practice had originated within their own borders. More to the point, though, these had been made in the culinary style of the polar archipelago.

Between the soft pieces of bread were smoked pork paired with pickles or sauerkraut, respectively—no doubt the work of my wonderful roommate. She'd helped me so much over the years; I couldn't thank her enough. Honestly, she had basically been my mother while I was here in the capital.

"Ashen Fraulein..."

With a heart full of thanks, I began to rewrap them for the road, when I noticed a little note on the cloth that read "Close your eyes" in oozing letters. I didn't remember it being there a moment ago, but I figured it, too, was the work of my invisible neighbor. I shut my eyes...and suddenly, someone hugged me.

My face was buried in smooth cloth that smelled faintly of soap. It lasted for only an instant, but something soft pressed into my forehead with a nigh inaudible smacking sound.

The alf who had taken care of me these three years sent me off with a kiss on my forehead.

A kiss there carried the meaning of a blessing.

What I had given to Elisa, I had received here. With it came a silent wish: *If nothing else, I hope you won't go hungry.*

Hard to part with as it was, I let the gentle fragrance dissipate before opening my eyes to an empty room. She was too shy to speak, let alone intentionally show herself, but even so, she wanted to say goodbye.

I turned my attention back to the sandwich wrapping to find that the message had changed: "May my Beloved Child's travels be safe."

The words vanished in another instant, leaving only a neat cloth and a handful of tasty-looking sandwiches.

Pressing a hand against my eyes, I managed to say, "Thank you, Ashen Fraulein."

I'd planned to leave this for just before I stepped out the door, but decided to do it now. Lady Agrippina used the finest cream money could buy when she drank red tea, and I'd swiped a small cup of it for the occasion.

Silkies were house spirits: the Ashen Fraulein had driven off all who vexed her to protect this home, and she would probably stay here for the rest of time. This was it for us. I'd pleaded with the madam not to give the place to anyone rude, but what happened here from now on wouldn't be my business.

So, if nothing else, I wanted to show her my appreciation. I didn't know whether I could ever truly repay her, but I would be happy if my intent came through.

A gift to a silkie must be done without ado; overstated gratitude merely sours their moods. I knew the common teachings, but I couldn't help myself.

After all, even if I visited Berylin one day, I doubted I'd ever return.

I made my way into the kitchen, her sanctum, and placed a bowl of curd on the stove. Next to it, I left the same locket of hair that the other alfar had so fancied. I'd tied up a handful of long strands cut at the base with yet another

bundle of hair, and while it was weird to say myself, I thought it looked pretty. I didn't know whether she'd like it as much as the other two, but it couldn't hurt to try.

But dawn is breaking.

I stepped through the front door and said the same thing I did every morning. Today, it rang so differently.

"I'm off."

[Tips] Thanking fairies can be done with gifts of milk, cream, shiny rocks, old coins—alfar are partial to all sorts of random goods. Yet hair from a blessed child may be the most highly sought, akin to literal gold in the fey realm.

Legends say that an alf with a striking gold necklace can be spotted in the low quarter of the Mages' Corridor.

A new journey comes with clear skies—that's the rule. Countless prospective heroes have squinted their eyes as they gaze out at the expansive blue above, taking in all the hope the future brings.

However, either the Sun God was feeling lazy today, or His grandson of Clouds and Rain was in a particularly poor mood: a terrific storm had rolled in at just the wrong time.

"Give me a break..."

Maybe it would've worked for a revenge story or a chronicle of war, but I was only a peasant boy wishing for good weather. I wasn't exactly in a position to nag the gods for Their daily disposition, but I couldn't help but feel like They were bogging down my new beginning.

That said, I wasn't going to put things off for later just for a little rain, and pulled up the hood on my outer cape. Umbrellas were more of an affluent accessory than a tool for bad weather, leaving us common folk to fight off precipitation with outerwear or to plain tough it out.

I'd never live it down if I caught a cold from this, though, so I had one trick up

my sleeve. I wove together a physical barrier in a way that left nothing remiss: from the outside, it would seem as though the rain was simply gliding off the surface of my mantle. Look, I know it seemed trivial, but the autumn rain was *cold*, especially with how far north the capital was.

I better get going before snow *starts getting in my way.* The first leg of my journey was going to take the imperial highway network straight south to try and outrun the winter. From there, I'd switch to a major westbound road known for its safety until I hit the state of Heidelberg, home to the lovely Konigstuhl canton.

The original trip from home had taken three months, but this time I was riding light without any company. Unlike Lady Agrippina, I didn't intend to be picky with my lodgings; I'd probably finish my travels a bit quicker.

But seeing as I was already out here, I wanted to stop by and see a few sights along the way. The capitals of the other big administrative states interested me as much as Berylin, and I'd always wanted to see the Konigstuhl castle with my own two eyes. If I ever came across a martial tournament, it might also be fun to rough up the competition; I could even win some pocket change in the process.

Speaking of earning coin, I was actually pretty well off for someone now officially unemployed. My budget to get home was a whopping *ten drachmae*.

For the longest time, my wages had gone straight to Elisa's tuition and my own living costs; the appearance of a patron had taken care of the former, and my rates had quickly outstripped the latter as I took on more responsibilities. From there, I hadn't been able to get rid of the money at all.

Lady Agrippina was no cheapskate, and she'd paid out my salary—and one befitting of my burdens, at that—without any pause. No matter what I said, that seething ball of scholarly pragmatism in a woman's skin simply couldn't trust free labor at her core, and she budgeted accordingly. I obviously wasn't going to betray her while she had the most powerful hostage of all right under her thumb, but I supposed there was also the matter of putting on airs for her peers.

Speaking of which, my familiarization with high society was almost enough to

make me forget that these drachmae were not, in fact, chump change to be given as a half-hearted tip; five of them added up to an independent farming household's entire yearly revenue. Just one gold coin was practically a stack of Benjamins, complete with a little belt.

Heaping mounds of cash posed a problem: what was I to do with it? I'd been sending money back home at regular intervals, but my family wasn't going to be any less baffled than me if I just passed the wealth along. Folks were thick in the countryside, for better or for worse: if one household suddenly turned rich, the gossip would be *fierce*.

So, I'd poured most of it into Elisa's gemstone and found myself left with this. I'd been saving up whenever I could, and the total sum wasn't too shabby. Truth be told, Lady Agrippina had offered to put together a stipend for my journey, but I'd refused—half because I didn't think it'd be right to start off with luxurious wealth, and half because it felt like she was trying to buy up stock in my life. I could hear her future voice now: "Don't you remember when I bankrolled your very first trek?" The collar on my neck was already tight enough; I didn't want to give her a handy leash to yank me around with.

Still, I had two years' worth of my family's income. Put to Earth dollars, that would be in the range of six figures; it was actually a bit on the frugal side through the lens of someone starting up a new business. I wasn't alone, after all: I had two horses to care for. They'd chew through a gold coin every year with ease. If we ended up going farther out into the countryside after leaving Konigstuhl, ten drachmae was probably near the minimum I could begin with.

But if I wanted to learn the ropes, having just enough to get by living a frugal lifestyle was perfect. A big purse inevitably had loose strings; being able to feel the dent caused by my everyday spending would certainly help keep me on my toes.

My best means to that end would be to find a caravan to travel with, or to rough it by myself while keeping inn visits to a minimum. With how accustomed I'd grown to being well fed, I'd need to reacclimate to a starker diet quickly if I wanted to try the latter...but, hey, I'd always wanted to try a solo adventure on horseback. Until now, I'd always had Mika along at the very least, so it was sure to be exciting new territory.

It was early autumn—merchants of every make ventured out to peddle wares as the common people stocked up for a quiet winter. I wouldn't have any trouble finding a caravan to link up with, but maybe I'd give it a shot in a well-patrolled region.

All right, it's about time.

My final exit from the College stables was marked by a heap of goodbyes from all the usual keepers. I couldn't blame them for their melancholy: I'd be down too if the kid who Cleaned off horse crap for cheap was leaving forever.

"Whoa!"

When I thought that this would be the last time I'd ever have to dodge that meddling unicorn's mischief, even that became...still annoying, actually. He hadn't managed to shave me bald or anything, but gods, had he given me my share of grief. I dodged his horseplay and he chomped his teeth together sadly. I'd recently learned that this beast was Lady Leizniz's carriage horse; I didn't know what I'd done to deserve so much attention from a master and steed I'd had so little interest in pursuing.

But I guess this is *the last time I'll ever see him.* Figuring it wouldn't hurt to say goodbye, I reached out to pet him—and he immediately gnawed on my hand. It wasn't a painful bite or anything, but my hand was covered in drool. *Ugh. Some things never change.*

Turning away from the self-satisfied unicorn, I caught back up with the restless Dioscuri. They may have been old for noble stock, but their magnificent builds were as full of life as ever.

Don't worry, boys. I won't let you go hungry.

[Tips] Unicorns are immortal phantasmal beasts spread across the Central Continent's western reach. Though incredibly loyal and capable of marching thousands of paces without tiring, they possess the inconvenient quirk of only serving the pure—a quality that has limited their adoption as a tamed breed.

However, there is one notable exception: a unicorn will allow another to steer it when towing a vehicle carrying its chosen master. In some kingdoms,

the royal family will wed its princesses with unicorn-drawn carriages as proof of their peerage.

Although my departure had been marked by an unfortunate rain, I thankfully came across a caravan willing to set off immediately.

Yes, there were tons of companies coming in and out at this time of year, and yes, it would have been harder *not* to find one to join up with, but a lot of the bigger businesses had chosen to stay a few nights in the capital rather than brave the storm. When the alternative was to stray from my plans on day one, I saw no issue with being grateful.

The Michael Company was a troupe of immigrants from a forested land west of the Empire, whose lack of imperial citizenship forced them to stay perpetually on the move. I met them in the south side of Berylin. They were advertising on a street lined with hotels, trying to scrounge up any extra change they could from people who wanted a ride.

In the Trialist Empire, caravans were either formed by independent merchants coming together (with the proposer fronting the bulk of the money) or by small troupes paying a share of their profits to be protected under a noble name; the Michael Company fell into the first category.

The titular Michael was the director of the whole caravan, and his family numbered twelve; his partners included a group of wandering merchants that numbered six across two families and a small wholesaler household eight members strong; ten mercenaries rounded out the troupe to bring the total to thirty-six. From there, eight people had offered to pony up or offer labor in exchange for a spot on the trip south; with me joining, that made for a final headcount of forty-five.

Though the number seemed impressive, it was still a touch shy of a midsize convoy. Big companies easily operated processions with over a hundred members, and this was about what I'd expect from an entrepreneur of this level.

"Enn'hey, 'e'll jus' borrow yer horses, bit, 'enn you can werk off tha rest."

Mr. Michael was a mountain of a mensch who had been born northeast of the

Empire, though still within the continent's bounds. His thick accent was sort of similar to the one Mika had drawn out of the Wustrow locals, but not quite the same: his Rhinian was clearly influenced by some other language entirely. His unkempt beard, the rough yet level curves of his face, and most of all his curly blond hair all pointed to a foreign heritage. While his stout build fit in with his imperial counterparts, the make of his face was markedly different.

While the Trialist Empire was home to many clans like Mika's who adopted new lives after fleeing worse conditions in their ancestral lands, there was no shortage of people who didn't—or couldn't—settle in and ended up on paths that wouldn't lead to citizenship. Judging from how thick his accent was and how distinct his features were, his clan was likely an intermarriage of families hailing from around the same region.

"Understood," I said. "But these are my master's horses, so I do ask that you treat them carefully."

Regardless of the specifics, I knew from his partnership with registered Berylinian merchants that he wasn't a bandit in disguise; that was enough for me to cast my lot with him.

To that end, I decided to push the narrative that I was a private soldier heading home on a temporary leave. Not only did I want to avoid scrutiny as a fifteen-year-old boy with a splendid sword and two fine stallions, but I figured I could spare the horses abuse if I made it seem like they were noble-owned.

Let me assure you that this wasn't mere laziness on my part. Even if I wanted to come clean, the extra effort it would require to validate my story would only be in service of worrying my poor benefactor—it wasn't worth it. Who was going to believe a brat barely of age had been *let go*? I could use Lady Agrippina's ring to prove it, sure, but I didn't want anyone getting any ideas after seeing my connections.

"Enn'hey, 'e're settin' off next tha bell rings. Don' go nowher'n."

I may have lied, but no one traveling with a common caravan would see through it; more importantly, it wasn't to anyone else's detriment. No matter how bad my luck usually was, it looked like I'd be able to start off on the right foot.

[Tips] Caravans operate under a simple principle: safety in numbers. The founder will set the course, and others will travel with them in pursuit of profits with relatively little danger.

The gods are in Their heaven—so went the old Rhinian adage. It was a fanciful way to say that the powers that be had not abandoned their posts, and that today was no less peaceful than any other.

On this particular day, I had taken it to heart.

Emphasis on *had*.

“All right, here we are. C’mon! What do you say we get the grime of travel scrubbed out?”

The lion guiding me by the shoulder—with incredibly awkward posture due to the disparity in height—stopped at a wall denoting a border in city sectors and loudly made his proposition.

Nemea—also known in the south as simbahili—were leonine demihumans who boasted golden coats and beastly faces that had only barely diverged from their ancestral origins. Leopold was one such nemea, the leader of a band of mercenaries known as the Bloody Manes. They were Mr. Michael’s bodyguards.

Eleven days after leaving the capital, I found myself in the middling city of Blankenburg, famed for being built on the banks of a gargantuan lake. We’d stopped to rest our horses and give our civilian comates a chance to get away from constant camping, so why the hell was I *here*?

“Now *this* is a pleasure street! The gals down south sure’ve got some nice meat on ’em!”

That’s right, this was a pleasure street—a red-light district. Operated in a semiofficial capacity, this was a den for the free and legal trade of sex. As I tried to trace my steps to see how I’d gotten here, I had to admit I wasn’t *totally* faultless...

It was my second evening together with the Michael Company, and I’d broken

off from the group to get a few practice swings in with Schutzwolfe. Two of Leopold's men crossed my path during their patrols, and we had a bit of a squabble: they must've been in a bad mood or something, because their first course of action was to pick a fight with language that would have to be censored out of any self-respecting text.

My initial plan was to brush them off like the menial thugs they were, but when one of them reached for my sword saying it was too good for a *widdle boy wike me*, I snapped and swept his feet out from under him. It escalated bit by bit from there until we were in an all-out fistfight—though perhaps that was a misleading term. I may have sunk my fists into noses and jaws, but they didn't land a single punch.

Before I knew it, I'd bloodied the faces of five men; things only settled down because Leopold heard the commotion and came over to put his men in line.

And you know what? That was fine by me. If nothing else, at least *he* had enough sense to assess the situation on the spot, realize they were in the wrong, and not join in for petty vengeance. I held back the urge to chew him out for not disciplining his subordinates with one sarcastic quip; impressed by my skill and magnanimity, the nemea instantly took a liking to me.

Then the recruitment drive from hell began.

From what he told me, his original crew had imploded because their boss had been skimming off way too much of the profit. Leopold had ended up killing the guy and forming a new band in its place, but the bad blood and chaos of the split-up had left all the negotiators and accountants dead.

Although Leopold could handle commanding troops, the business end of being captain was a struggle for him. He could read and write at a basic level, but he couldn't use an abacus, and gods knew he couldn't do math in his head. Behind his good-natured smile, he was in dire straits.

But then came someone who could speak in proper palatial speech and do arithmetic—I'd overdone it with the good deeds. You see, I'd only intended to brush off any trouble and repay the troupe for bringing me along, but I *may* have politely corrected a disreputable salesperson for their poor calculations when we'd stopped to resupply. How was I supposed to know that three small

coincidences would stack up into this obnoxious torrent of invitations to a merc group?

I'd been totally on the "Safety in numbers!" train when signing up, but I'd been a fool to forget the rule that where man goes, trouble follows. After spending so long solving interpersonal matters with roundabout dealings of authority and wealth, I was ill versed in Leopold's rustic approach to human affairs. Even back in Konigstuhl, there was an unspoken order to things. Looking back, I could now see I'd enjoyed a childhood free of confrontation thanks to being one of the leading picks as a future watchman-in-reserve—though the realization that I wasn't ready for a rougher style of negotiation came far too late.

As you can see, Leopold's most recent maneuver in his charm offensive was leading me by the collar into a den of vice.

"It's lively, hey? This is a good look—the streets with traffic have the prettiest gals! What's your pick, Mr. Erich? Mensch? If you ask me, demihumans ain't too bad either! They've got all the right passion in them, you know?"

After walking through a wide-open door, we were greeted by an architectural middle finger to the unity and elegance the Empire so prized. Walls were painted in garish colors, bricks came together to form nude silhouettes, there were a handful of buildings that would need to be blurred out in post, and countless ladies lined up behind latticed windows to give prospective customers a peek. At best, it was thrilling; at worst, utterly tawdry. Any effort that would ordinarily be leveraged in an appeal to reason had been dropped in favor of captivating the mind's baser, more reflexive mechanisms—such was the way of a red-light district.

Every city in Rhine with at least a thousand residents was home to an entertainment quarter. Even the prudish powers of medieval Europe had granted licenses to sex workers; it was little wonder that the pragmatic Empire would accept them as a necessary evil, especially when it came with an uptick in state revenue.

The degradation of sexual mores led to a degradation in public safety, after all: not only were criminal organizations liable to use forced labor and trafficked

people to peddle vices for profit, but a lack of oversight could lead to infectious diseases spreading like wildfire.

In the eyes of the powers that be, the maintenance of a “playground” that lived up to a minimum standard of safety was worth the small slight against their regal image. Though the crown would never pride itself on how these pleasure districts created jobs for the destitute and prevented the growth of crime, it wouldn’t go out of its way to disparage an institution it considered a necessity.

But honestly? If Leopold wanted to smooth-talk me, I would’ve liked to try one of the freshwater delicacies Blankenburg was so famous for instead.

“What’s the matter? You’re all stiff, man—where’d that killer swordsman go?! Don’t tell me you haven’t gotten to draw *this* sword yet, hah!”

The nemea laughed heartily at his dirty joke, but I wasn’t sharing the load. I jabbed him in the side to tell him to shut up, but he was so tall that I only hit his thigh; worse still, his leg was so muscular that it didn’t even budge. I felt like a wimp.

Grr, no fair. Nemea were huge—especially this one. Leopold was strong enough to impress *me* at first glance, and I couldn’t help but wonder why he was living the mercenary life out here in the boonies. I supposed that his attempts to take me in as an accountant showed some ambitions of expansion, but someone like him had to be turning down an easier path to chase them.

...Not that I was one to talk after I’d given up knighthood and adoption by His Majesty’s count thaumapalatine to walk off on an adventure. Yeah, that was a boomerang of a statement, through and through.

“But hey, it’s the same deal as a real blade, Mr. Erich. You’ll wanna get used to wielding it sooner rather than later. Falling for a girl’s all fun and games till you get one little kiss and, uh... Well, if she cuts you off then, you’ll know why!”

I felt like that was a tad vulgar, even for a merc. I mean, I’d heard similar stories, but still.

That said, whether it was my company or some other factor, I managed to keep my courage in the face of the district’s powdery fog and wafting booze.

Because boy, had my first attempt ever gone wrong.

Truth be told, a male Mika and I had already visited the capital's red-light district once this past summer.

In the process of getting used to his shifts in gender, my old chum had encountered a perplexing phenomenon and decided to come to me for advice. Namely, he'd been arrested by an indescribable curiosity that was barely present at all when female or agender; at times, the risqué conversations of his peers would catch his ears whether he wanted to listen or not. In short, the hormonal fluctuations of teenage life were starting to affect his thinking.

The topic of entertainment districts eventually came up in our discussion, and we'd decided it wouldn't hurt to just look and see what the deal was with our own two eyes. But, well, it was readily apparent that we were unripe: not only did we draw sympathetic gazes from the patrons of the district, but the ladies out front teased us wherever we went. Unable to handle the licentious atmosphere, we ended up scampering off, drawing the conclusion that we were still too young for such matters.

I mean, I had an average amount of experience from my past life, of course, but my body was just so young, and I had a worked-up Mika next to me, and—you know how it is.

Anyway, while our embarrassing, boyish episode would be something to look back on in the future, for now, I was thankful that it had primed me not to be too skittish.

"Ah, it's an honor to think I'll be treating you to your first battle! You know what? Let's get over to the finest establishment this town has to—"

"Uh, Mr. Leopold, a moment?"

"Hm? What's wrong?"

But whether I was nervous or not, I'd had just about enough. Letting myself get thrown into a brothel would be an embarrassing slight on my dignity. I knew I'd be tracking mud on his name, not to mention how I'd be snubbing Mr. Michael and the rest of the caravan, but I made up my mind: it was time to flee.

"I'd like to stop by the restroom, if you don't mind."

“Ohh, you’ve gotta piss? Ha ha, sharp thinking, Mr. Erich! Go on—wouldn’t want you to jam up in the heat of the moment!”

It wasn’t like I was losing out on value: my entry into the Michael Company convoy had been predicated on the labor of me and the Dioscuri. Slipping away before our agreed-upon destination made me feel a bit guilty, but nobody wanted to see this obnoxious recruitment drive run its course to a logical, bloody end.

My plan to kick back and take it easy with a caravan had proved a bust, and I hadn’t even gotten a chance to try any of the fried Blankenburg fish I’d been looking forward to, but I swallowed back my regrets in the name of avoiding violence. I had a hunch—no, actually, I was *sure*—that Leopold would bring it to that at some point. Short as our time together had been, I had him pegged as the kind of man who would get his way by force or die trying.

If it ever got through his skull that words alone wouldn’t put me under his wing, he’d try “persuasion” with a Strength modifier: “If I win, you join me; if you win, you walk free.”

Though imagining it alone made me want to ask whether he’d made INT his dump stat, I had to admit that fists *were* pretty persuasive every now and again. How many times had I intimidated an NPC to play it my way when playing the part of a big, dumb oaf?

Yet in this case, I stood to gain nothing if I won. Cutting down the captain of a tiny mercenary clique would bring me no honors, and it was all but guaranteed that his men would jump in to avenge their fallen leader. Things would get tangled faster than wired earphones in pockets, and neither I nor the caravan who needed them as bodyguards wanted that.

I was the spark about to start the fire, and the smartest course of action was to just remove myself entirely.

With my mind made up, I just had to stop by one of the many public restrooms littering the Empire. Most cities couldn’t match the impressive infrastructure of Berylin, but any urban center with a sewage system was sure to have a booth on every street—especially in a part of town that saw so much foot traffic.

I got in line behind red-light district patrons trying to empty out before doing the deed, and handed a coin to the bouncer when I got to the entrance. Public restrooms in Japan had been totally free and passable at worst, except in the most run-down areas; here, entry demanded a fee. One assarius was hardly anything, but the government wanted to offset the cost of labor. The dutiful industry of the shovelers and cleaners who labored to make these facilities possible brought a tear to my eye.

Alas, their work amounted to little: the pervasive attitude was that as paying customers, people could be as clumsy as they wanted.

A rancid stink hit me, but I had no intention of squatting over the filthy toilet. Instead, I employed a classic tactic for escaping any ugly situation: climbing out of the bathroom window.

I felt like a loser for running away like this when I hadn't even lost a bet or skipped a bar tab, but I had to do what I had to do. Whether the enemy was unbeatable or just plain annoying to deal with, sneaking and talking one's way out of fights was but another of tabletop gaming's charms—at least, that's what I told myself to swallow my pride.

But man, was every personal relationship going to bring more trouble?

I'd gotten my fill of dodging a constant deluge of job offers already. Having a caravan to rely on was nice, but when I put it on a scale with the discord other people introduced...it seemed that I was better off avoiding others to prioritize my dreams. If worse came to worst, I could find myself locked into a truly inescapable twist of fate.

Adventurers and mercenaries were all basically the same thugs to some people, but not to me. Mercenaries fought for a living; adventurers fought, but mainly in service of other causes. Sure, there was going to be a lot of tedium, but romantic challenges thought insurmountable lay hidden among the fold. That all hinged on my ability to make a name for myself, but when it came down to it, my ambitions weren't cut out for mercenary life.

As fond as I was of war chronicles, my time managing the Ubiorum county had taught me more about the woes of logistical leadership than I cared to know. Signing up to be a vice-captain-cum-treasurer for a growing band of

mercenaries was like being paid in fatigue and opportunity cost, with a side investment of appreciating stress—I'd pass, thanks.

"Ugh, this is so embarrassing."

I'd made my way out of the window while thinking about what I should've done and taken off. I figured Leopold might throw a fit when he realized I wouldn't be coming back, but that wasn't my problem; hopefully the ladies of the district could calm him down.

But what had I been meant to do? I couldn't skip out on my training with an eye toward the future, and I couldn't let people walk all over me either; if that was enough to draw attention, then could I ever *not*?

For a brief moment, the possibility that this was purely bad luck crossed my mind. Yet the thought filled me with such dread and such little avenue for future improvement that I quit thinking entirely and sprinted back to my lodge.

Man, I wonder if I can find a trait to intimidate the rabble just by standing there or something...

[Tips] Although they work in smaller numbers, mercenary groups function as armies. This military framework makes it difficult to employ them in the same way one might an adventurer.

Autumn of the Fifteenth Year

Player Agency

Unlike video games, TRPGs allow the player infinite agency so long as the GM permits it. One can graciously forgive a long-standing villain, impose harsh retribution for the most trivial wrongdoing, or just kill everyone as a joke. However, the consequences are then decided by the GM: control over one's actions must never be conflated with control over their outcomes.

With experience under my belt, I'd come to the conclusion that riding solo was more exhausting than I'd realized. How did that Finnish troll's best friend make it look so fun and easy?

I couldn't even relieve myself in peace without someone else to watch my stuff, not to mention how I had to fetch water, start fires, and cook meals all on my own. Once night fell, an attack could come at any time; I hadn't gotten any deep sleep as of late.

For as well policed as the Empire was, its lands were not the same as a serene campsite in Japanese woods. My life was mine alone to defend, and as much as this went without saying, that made it significantly harder to get along.

Magic could make things easier for me, but I didn't have the technical mastery to use loud spells like Farsight without leaving a mystic trail everywhere—clearly a breach of my master's final assignment—and the perpetual barriers employed by College professors were too mana-hungry for me to justify the purchase.

All in all, I didn't feel like I'd gotten any *rest* in the five days since leaving the caravan. It hadn't even been a week yet, and I was already sick and tired of traveling alone.

"I wish you two could talk. Then we could take turns keeping watch..."

I petted my horses, and the brothers snorted like they were laughing along

with my ridiculous complaint.

With sunset approaching, I'd broken off the highway onto a smaller road and begun setting up camp in a clearing a ways down. The imperial highway network only served to connect linchpin cities to one another, but local lords and magistrates funded the construction of roads that served more local interests. The one I was on now was a country trail that cut through the forest to connect a canton to an urban center. It was a simple dirt path without so much as grooves for a carriage's wheels, and the inns alongside it were sparse, each a few days out from the last.

In place of proper lodgings was a clearing by the river. Construction workers had once used this area as a site to store their building material, and it had been left vacant to serve as a campground for travelers and merchants.

I was joined by three other groups tonight. Fall was notable for how many caravans packed the roads, but it was also a popular season for personal travel. Over the past five days, I hadn't set up my tent in pure solitude even a single time.

All the more reason to stay on my toes.

Cynical as it was to say, crime was only possible where people were there to do it. Wild animals tended to avoid developed roadways, especially when big trains of merchants or tax couriers tended to pass by; the more pressing threat was ever bandits and fellow travelers.

If all the world were full of saints, we wouldn't need soldiers or guards at all. Working backward, the continued existence of these roles was proof that danger was present, and that the crooks who saw lives as profit to be harvested were still about.

As a god in one of my favorite TRPGs—or at least, an alternate version of that god—once said, it's not a crime if you don't get caught. Here in Rhine, those words hung heavy over my head.

Ethics were such a fickle thing when easy treasure dangled before one's eyes. When the quick cure to a cold night was usually a cup of liquor, it was simple to see how the bonds of virtue might shatter.

With that in mind, here was a helpless young kid leading two horses for a solo journey; I was the perfect mark, at least on the surface. I wished people would find some distinction between picking up a quarter on the side of the road and leaving a mangled corpse to the wolves, but alas.

The constant alertness required to protect my belongings and the worry over intruders in the night made it difficult to get any rest. Upholding one's property might be a foundational requirement of life, but it was one based on a tremendous deal of effort.

If only I were alone. At least then my only enemies would be the animals of the forest.

Setting up camp in the presence of strangers who could, at any moment and for any reason, morph into burglars weighed heavy on my mind. As little as it did to allay my fears, I tied up my horses a ways away from the rest of the travelers and quickly propped up my tent. I'd already filled my waterskin by the river, and the Dioscuri had gotten their fill of both food and drink. Yet even with all my preparation, I couldn't rule out the possibility that a denizen of this cruel world might succumb to temptation and interrupt my sleep.

After all, it had already happened. Twice.

What fate had befallen those unwanted guests was, well—suffice it to say, they would not be making the same mistake again. Both times, they'd displayed signs of being repeat offenders; I'd turned them in to the nearest imperial patrol without any hesitation.

Having no one but myself to rely on was so draining that I'd even begun to think it might've been worth enduring that onslaught of job offers just to stay with the caravan. The odds of trouble and bloodshed seemed about on par anyway.

"Agh, oh well. I better at least make time for some shut-eye."

I still needed to start a fire and eat supper, but I was turning in as soon as that was done.

I kneaded together lightly seasoned barley with a bit of water and tossed some dried rations into a boiling pot to rehydrate them. After adding chopped

jerky for a bit of savoriness, I had a soup that wasn't particularly great, but was perfectly edible. My bread was tough enough to shrug off teeth, but after steeping it in the stew for a little while, it offered some small solace amidst my high-strung lifestyle.

Once I was done, I sipped on a cup of red tea and took a drag of my pipe to cap off my day. I could only relax at the level where my Presence Detection would still trigger, but now was my chance to give my body a break.

I would have liked to find a new caravan to tag along with as soon as I came to know my plight, but my terrible luck had once again reared its ugly head. Sure, I'd come across a band of merchants in one of the cantons I'd dropped by, but they'd been so shady that I had to pass them by. I didn't know how else to put this, but they seemed like the very types I was currently on the lookout for. Look, I wasn't spoiled enough to wish for an imperial patrol to accompany me; all I was asking for was a camping buddy who looked like they'd at least *criticize* an injustice occurring before their eyes.

I crawled into the tent, jammed my lower half into my sleeping bag—I had to be ready to jump out at a moment's notice—and threw on a blanket. Even after dusk, it was remarkably noisy outside.

There were a few voices going back and forth, none in very amicable tones. While I wouldn't go so far as to call it a *fight*, it was clear these people weren't laughing over drunken jokes.

With how far out they were, the thick tarp of my tent muffled the contents of their discussion; still, it wasn't pleasant to hear a dispute. I would've liked to think it was just a few friends who were close enough to be rough with their language, but the stern voices told a different story.

Some people don't have any consideration for those around them...

"If they don't stop within the hour, I'll go cool them off myself."

A short while after grumbling to myself, I managed to fall into a light nap.

Birds began to chirp as daybreak approached, and everyday rhythm roused my consciousness from slumber. I let out a huge yawn; that I couldn't stop myself was proof of my fatigue. Five days without deep sleep was starvation for

the brain. I'd need to find some companions soon, or I'd have to take a pit stop at an inn somewhere. At this rate, I was going to break down.

My body cried out in protest as I dragged it out of its warm cocoon and crawled out of the tent. I took a swig from my waterskin and was rinsing out my mouth when I noticed something strange: there were fewer tents than when I had turned in for the night.

The three other groups at the campground had pitched eight tents in total. My closest neighbors had owned three of them, along with two mules; nothing but the largest tent remained.

Come to think of it, I'd woken up once in the night because I heard movement outside. It hadn't seemed like any of the presences were headed my way, though, so I'd just gone back to sleep. Had something happened that forced them to relocate in a hurry?

I cautiously scanned the campgrounds but came up with nothing; the other groups were still around too, so it was probably a personal matter. *All right, looks like it's none of my business.*

After brushing my teeth, I got a few swings in to dispel the haze of drowsiness; nice and warmed up, I started a fire and had a light breakfast. Once I finished with my morning routine, I started preparing to leave.

"Whaaaaaaaaaa?!"

Just as I was stuffing my folded tent into a knapsack, my neighbor finally awoke—made apparent to everyone by a hysterical scream. Wondering who was causing such a ruckus at this early hour, I looked over to see a zentaur.

Zentaurs were strikingly similar to the mythical kentauroi that appeared in legends. The primary difference was that those spoken of in stories had a reputation for intellect ill matching their brutality; modern zentaurs were better known for a similar penchant for violence improbably wedded to common geniality. Infamous for nearly bringing the Blessed Kingdom to its knees in the Age of Gods, this equestrian(?) people had once been feared as the Living Scourge, enslaving their felled enemies and marching them across a massive nomadic empire—but nowadays, they'd melted into society like everyone else.

They were demihumans who boasted equine frames that turned into mensch-like torsos from the waist up. Like arachne, there was variety to their builds, but none were particularly uncommon in the Empire. Those who prided themselves on sustained speed could be seen running about as couriers, the stronger among them worked as farmers or builders, and many used the huge frames and martial power inherited from their forefathers to become knights.

We'd had one zentaur family back in Konigstuhl. Though they didn't own any land of their own, they were built like workhorses; they used their ability to pull heavy plows to clear out farmland and make their living. Back before we'd bought Holter, they'd helped out at our farm every now and again too.

The person losing her marbles outside her tent was obviously no workhorse: she was a warrior. Her dapple-gray lower half was tremendous, packed with an overwhelming might that wasn't present in those who specialized in speed. Her muscles were so girthy that it made her overall outline somewhat stumpy; geared for battle, her build was no less impressive than the two warhorses I'd ridden here.

Not only that, but her mensch side had not been neglected. The contour of every muscle from the tips of her long arms to the bottom of her abs was clearly defined and unhidden; she wore only a single article of underclothes that lifted and loudly announced a prodigious contour in its own right. Her shoulders and arms were broad—especially her left, no doubt the marker of many shots with a heavy bow. Tiny scars crisscrossed the surface of her skin, painting a long history of battle.

Yet for how magnificent her physique was, she had an incredibly jarring case of baby face. Her round nose was small, as was her mouth, and to cap it all off, the gentle slant of her eyes housed chocolate irises paired with the rest of her features to evoke the image of a bratty kitten. A glossy gray, her hair was the same color as her mane; the short cut she was sporting added to her juvenile image. That said, one part of her head violently clashed with the rest: of her two sets of ears, the left horselike one had been torn off from the base, leaving only a painful-looking wound.

My first impression of her was that she was a really big kid. It was hard to decide whether to refer to her as a woman or a girl: while she was certainly

young, it was hard to think of someone so brawny as being my age. Ah, but her face was *really* babyish, so maybe? Hrm...

“Where the hell’d they go?!”

The zentaur’s shrill cry as she frantically looked around was better suited to her face than body. She bolted off in a panic, only to return moments later, only to *then* run off again in another direction; it was easy enough to see she was the restless type, unaccustomed to thinking before acting.

Aha—your pals ran off on you. Judging from her readiness for combat, she was either a mercenary, an adventurer, or a roaming knight. In any case, she hadn’t gotten along with her travel mates and they’d sneaked off without her.

“Dammit! They took *everything*?! You have to be kidding! What am I supposed to do?!”

The circumstances of last night’s squabble were now clear. At the end of their argument, the rest of her party must’ve been fed up enough that they’d steeled themselves for the perils of lightless travel. It seemed like a prudent decision: from the looks of things, she wielded great capacity for violence, and a peaceful farewell seemed unlikely.

It was a familiar tale, and I quickly lost all interest. Vague as the memories were, I recalled that parties of adventures kicking a member out like this had practically been an everyday affair. Er, I guess those developments had usually ended with the exile secretly having been an important member of the team, and they’d end up leading a new life elsewhere, so...maybe not.

“Shit... Seriously? What am I gonna do? Who do they think took care of them this whole time? Those ungrateful little— Huh? No way, my bag too?!”

A few minutes of observing from afar had been enough for me to determine that she was likely not an easy character to work under. I didn’t know whether genuine skill had fed her arrogance or whether some other factor was at play, but instinct told me she wasn’t a pleasant boss or team member.

Everyone but her was already preparing to leave, and none of us wanted to get involved; the other campers quickly scurried off while she was busy pacing to and fro. I tried to make after them, but it seemed I was a bit too late.

She'd been running around the clearing to search for any trace of her missing companions, but suddenly stopped and angrily slammed her front legs into the ground. Then, kicking off, she zoomed straight toward me.

Wow, zentaurs sure are fast. Common wisdom held that they were the fastest race outside those who could take flight, and I believed it.

"Hey, you."

"May I help you?"

Now, I wasn't going to ask that she use palatial speech or anything, but I would've expected an *attempt* at being polite.

"Did you see where they went—my followers? There were two mensch, a goblin, and a pygmy—uh, a—what was it in Rhinian again? Uh... Whatever, those and a pygmy."

Ohh. Though her speech was distinctly lower class, it was fluent enough that I'd assumed she was native to the Empire; yet a mix-up in racial terms showed she was from abroad. I was impressed: she had a few quirks of pronunciation, but nothing that couldn't be written off as a regional accent.

Sifting through my memory, I recalled that "pygmies" were what people in the polar north called floresiensis. Mika spoke both the northern archipelagic and northern mainland languages on top of Rhinian, and they'd taught me a few words here and there.

"Who can say? I heard a bit of movement late at night, but I couldn't tell you which way they were headed."

But regardless of whether her words came across clearly, her attitude was not that of someone asking a stranger for help. In truth, I had a read on which way they'd gone based on the direction of the sounds, but I didn't feel like helping someone who only saw me as a free font of information. Besides, if this was how she carried herself, I couldn't blame her subordinates for wanting to get away.

"Ugh, jeez..."

She scratched her head and began cussing the deserters out in the

archipelagic tongue—it was some kind of comment about their mothers' heritage—while glancing toward her tent. It was a grand pavilion that could house her massive frame, but the front had been left open to reveal it was nearly empty.

The only things that remained were an armor chest, a large wrapping that likely housed a weapon, and a singular bow. I surmised that the others had swiped the rest of her belongings as a severance fee, and that the armaments only remained on account of their size and weight.

How careless can you be? At least take responsibility for your own stuff.

"...Hey, you. Which way are you headed?"

"West, to my hometown. Why?"

I was curious to see what she'd do, but hadn't expected this. Instead of packing up or grabbing what she could carry to chase after her missing team, she decided to extend her conversation with me.

I've got a bad feeling about this.

"Your hometown, huh? Which way's that?"

"Pardon me for asking, but is that any of your concern?"

The zentaur looked me over in what was, frankly, an impudent appraisal. She scanned me up and down with cocky eyes and then shifted to my horses with a smirk.

"Hey, want me to be your bodyguard? It's dangerous out here for someone who talks so fancy to be alone, especially with *two* horses."

"Excuse me?"

"And in exchange, you'll be my attendant until we get to where you're going—but don't worry, I'll make it cheap. Let's say around ten librae a day. Oh, but you'll have to put up for the cost of travel, and I think a gold piece or two would be good once I finish the order."

What the hell is this moron saying? was written all over my face, but you'll have to forgive my ill manners. I was *genuinely* caught off guard.

She had no gear and no money, and she had the audacity to basically *extort* me? Worse still, she'd gleaned that I had some wealth from my belongings—at least, that's what her outrageous rates told me. My research told me that an average adventurer would be expected to work for half that pay at most, and that was with their paying for their own travels, taking care of their damn selves, and not begging for a bonus.

"And if I decline your offer?"

"...Do you *really* want to do that?"

As soon as I hinted at being uninterested, she unabashedly turned up the pressure. She'd been all smiles when I was cooperating, but this forceful coercion was the hallmark of a typical villain. She seemed unwilling to just kill me and take my belongings by force, making her almost seem innocent in comparison to the lowlifes hanging on the sides of the highway, but I wasn't going to simply ignore the depravity of her protection racket.

Something about her pissed me off. Now that she was closer, her skill was *palpable* in the way she carried her well-trained body—to use it for *this*?

"You talk fancy and wear nice clothes. I bet you're some rich kid who listened to a bunch of sagas and got excited about seeing the world, right? But it's dangerous out here. If you don't keep within your means, you'll end up rotting on the side of a road somewhere."

She was polished: her natural stance had no openings, and the aura shrouding her told the tale of an unyielding dedication to growing stronger. While I wouldn't ever lose to her, she was strong enough to impress me; so what was this utter farce? She was no better than the drunkards at the pub.

A healthy mind in a healthy body was truly a thing to wish for. Yet here was an example that spat on Juvenal's grave as he rolled below.

"You want me to hire a bodyguard weaker than myself? Please. At most, I might consider you as a porter."

It was such a terrible shame. Had she possessed a character befitting of her wonderful skill, she would have been a beautiful person. She was like the cheap candies handed out at Bon festivals: the colorful exterior was but a veneer to

hide the bland, boring sugar underneath. I was as disappointed now as I had been biting into those treats during my first childhood.

Perhaps that was why I snapped back. Taunt and get taunted; it wasn't my fault that was the way of things.

"Huh? Hey, *runt*. What'd you just say?"

"Oh, I'm sorry. Rhinian must be difficult for you. Let me make it easier for you to make out. You. Weaker. Than—"

Before I could finish, her front legs came crashing down on me—not just one, but both of them. Just like the angry buck of a horse, her kick could flatten plate armor, crack a rib cage, and splatter the heart all in one go.

Too bad I'd seen it coming.

Taunt and get taunted wasn't the end of the rule: it went on with the unwritten law of talk shit and get hit. I'd already primed myself for a scrap, and Lightning Reflexes slowed down the interaction dozens of times over.

In tantalizing slow motion, her legs shot forward to crush the skull of an annoying brat; meanwhile, I dropped low and slipped under her hooves. Her right leg had gone up half a beat before her left; the double-hit attack whizzed by, each only missing by a fist's width. But no matter how impressive her might, it meant nothing if it didn't land.

Further, she'd opted for an overwhelming strike—surely out of rage—which did her no favors at this range. Sure, a clean hit would send this cocky runt flying ten meters into the air and splattering into a satisfying pulp on a nearby tree, but what kind of fighter didn't plan ahead to the possibility of the opponent dodging?

The saddest part of all was that despite the lack of thought, her form was immaculate. Anyone with a normal reaction time wouldn't have been able to dodge in time, even if they knew it was coming. She wasn't just swinging around her natural-born might; practice and effort had gone into honing this technique. It came from the deep understanding a true warrior had of her every muscle and nerve...which just made it all the more wasteful.

Had this kick not been the snap response to a simple provocation, she would

have been beautiful.

Using my leverage to get underneath, I slammed the whole of my weight into her before she could regain her footing.

“Eek?!”

Posted only on half her legs, the zentaur easily rolled over. Er, well, that was too cute a description: she crashed to earth with such violence that the dirt, underbrush, and anything else under her was obliterated and scattered in every direction.

Perhaps this went without saying, but I hadn’t just dumbly tackled her. Kicking introduced imbalances in posture, and I had gotten a read on where to press in order to tip over her center of mass—with several Unseen Hands pushing me forward.

Obviously, a sub-sixty-kilogram mensch wasn’t going to overpower a zentaur. Most horses clocked in at over five hundred kilos, war horses more than that, and the demihuman zentaurs had a mensch’s upper half adding to that weight. This was a people known to cleave through formations of shield bearers several layers strong; I needed a dirty trick or two if I wanted to keep the upper hand.

But with my crafty technique, it was impossible for her or any hypothetical onlooker to tell that I’d used magic. Without a particularly gifted set of eyes, it would either seem like I’d put out more power than what my build let on, or that this was some bizarre stroke of luck.

Knocked onto her side, the zentaur blankly lay there, unable to wrap her mind around what had happened. She looked up at me with an expression that betrayed pure disbelief.

I couldn’t blame her. Getting flipped over by a tiny—gods, did it hurt to say that—opponent like me was sure to reduce any warrior’s prized pride and honor to dust.

“Let me say this again. I don’t need a bodyguard weaker than myself.”

“You—you little—”

“I will never best you in a contest of speed or strength, but you will *never* best

me in an exchange of lives." Truthfully, I wasn't sure I'd win *every* single time without the overt use of magic, but I figured making a bigger claim would be more intimidating. And when she glanced toward her tent, I astutely added, "Do you think things would be different if you had your weapon? Fine, then. Go fetch it. And don't worry—I'll go easy enough not to kill you."

"You—grr! You little shit!"

What followed were a handful of insults that were indecipherable with my limited archipelagic knowledge, but I think she'd made a comment on the size of my genitals and said something about the characteristics of my anus. And, well, I supposed both *would* be rather small for someone whose physique had great equine inspiration.

These silly thoughts bounced around my head as I unsheathed Schutzwolfe and tried to ignore the cursed whispers suggesting I needed a bigger weapon for my cavalryesque foe. Looking over, the zentaur was scrambling inside her tent to bring out her weapon; she must've been really anxious to fight, because she tore the binding right off instead of unwrapping it.

The gargantuan war axe was so ominous that it converted the refreshing rays of morning sunshine into a perilous gleam. Fitted for a zentaur, the long handle was akin to a mensch spear's; the broad head would have looked like a caricature on anything shorter. A clump of steel shaped into a meat tenderizer balanced out the back half of the blade, but its bumps were far sharper than anything used for culinary purposes. Forget *softening* flesh, that thing would shred it along with any armor it came packaged in.

Just for good measure, the thing had a metal point on the other end. Even so, I had qualms about classifying it as a halberd—the axe portion was *that* big.

The terrifying weapon was a good fit for its huge owner; in fact, it was a weapon *only* a zentaur could make full use of. A jockey on horseback was limited by the unavoidable weakness of their steed's neck. Without that, she was free to swing to her heart's desire.

In both reach and weight, she was malice incarnate. Paired with the leverage of cavalry, she had the means to plow through ten normal soldiers with every attack.

“This is your own fault for letting me draw my weapon! It’s too late to back down now!”

Although the axe itself seemed like a monstrosity unusable by mortals, the zentaur swung it around with the ease of handling a tree branch. At first, she held the far end to make the most of its lopsided weight; but suddenly, she shifted her grip to the center of the shaft and began twirling it like a spear.

Oh, I see. The cartoonishly uneven distribution of mass was to guarantee force behind every hit without needing to rely on centrifugal momentum. While positioning the fulcrum of motion farther out increased power, it decreased precision in direct proportion. Instead of necessitating a full rotation for any follow-up swing, this design allowed the wielder to treat it like a polearm.

The head of the axe could split helmet and skull alike; the spiky hammer could crush any shield; the tip could thrust forward like a spear. I’d never seen this foreign design in the Empire. Despite its savage appearance—or rather, in perfect sync with it—the tool was perfectly polished for the art of violence.

“Name yourself! I’ll show you here and now that I’m the stronger one!”

Alas, it wasn’t enough. This wasn’t even close to being intimidating. When it came to big opponents wielding long arms, Miss Nakeisha had her beat; those weight-and-chain polearms had been an ordeal to work around.

“I have no name to give to a mere wench! If you want mine, then prove yourself worthy in battle!”

“Grgh! Fine!”

Presumably, most of her opponents shrank in fear when she flourished her deadly weapon. Unfortunately for her, she’d need to lift a building with her bare hands to spook me; I’d been through too much to fear somebody who was only scary by *mensch* standards.

“Graaaaah!”

With a shout that scattered the birds nearby from their morning perches, the zentaur sprinted toward me. She rocked her axe back and forth, making sure not to reveal the course of her attack until the final moment.

Even then, she was too forthright with her intentions. Her eyes remained fixed on my own, and I could plainly see that she wanted to stab me through the chest. A few paces before contact—a distance cleared in fractions of a second—she quit swinging and locked the polearm into a lancelike position.

Had I not seen this coming, I would probably have struggled to react. Sheer technique melded a stable stride and untold power to create an attack that was nothing short of masterful.

Ahh, what a terrible, terrible waste.

Alas, her axe did not pierce my heart, nor did she manage to hoist my dead body toward the heavens. I waited until she was too close to divert her course and stepped in, turning the act of dodging into the first step of a counterattack.

“Whoa?!”

Schutzwolfe raced toward her without mercy: the broad side of my sword slammed straight into her stomach.

“Augh! Ouuugh...”

“Had I used the blade, you would be spilling your guts across the ground by now.”

The zentaur had kept going after missing her mark; when she came to a stop a short distance away, she put a hand over the left side of her horse torso. Her arms were disproportionately long in comparison to mensch, and it seemed the connection at her hips was surprisingly flexible. Still, rubbing the bruise wasn’t going to make the pain go away; I hadn’t cracked any ribs, but she’d be aching with every movement for the foreseeable future.

“Grr... No, I wouldn’t! I was too fast! Your sword woulda gone flying if you’d tried to cut me!”

“Do you truly think I don’t have the skill to put a blade to a quick opponent? Fine, then! Come at me again!”

“Dammit! Argh, dammit!”

Though she seemed proficient in Rhinian, that evidently didn’t extend to her insults: she once again chose to use her mother tongue for that. This time, she

skipped my immediate family to insinuate heinous somethings about my forefathers as she approached again, swinging her axe in a wide arc.

The control she displayed in the face of her weapon's ludicrously awkward make betrayed the blood, sweat, and tears that had fueled it. *So why are you like* this*?*

Steel death came down on me from the right, but I evaded it by cheating further in the same direction. I pressed my blade against her, carefully gliding the edge across her skin as I passed; a thin streak remained in its wake. Though it wasn't deep enough to call a score, it outlined how I could easily have rent open her humanoid midsection to destroy the massive lungs housed behind her abs.

"There go your lungs! You're drowning in your own blood!"

"I-I would've been fine if I was wearing armor!"

"Really, now? Then come at me again! I'll show you that the result won't change, armor or not!"

Though her curiously deep pool of insults had begun to amuse me, I showed no mercy in countering the subsequent flurry of deadly strikes.

I dodged an overhead swing by shifting my weight to one side, bringing my sword up to meet her armpit as it came down. Joints were a constant weakness in armor, and I certainly would have severed her tendon with her added momentum had I not intentionally stopped short.

Even though it was obvious I'd *let* her get away, she doggedly tried to reverse course for an uppercut. I pressed toward her, curling into a ball; as I rolled through her follow-up offensive, I put out a roundhouse swing and lightly tapped her defenseless front leg. *One leg gone—now you can't even stand.*

Next, she tried to trample me underfoot, so I slid in between her legs and let Schutzwolfe gently caress the bottom of her frame on the way. Ah, wait—this time, I was in the wrong. Had I actually broken skin there, I would have come out covered in blood, guts, and feces.

At this point, she was on a mad rampage. Rolling out from underneath, I jumped to my feet and slapped her butt as hard as I could. Part of her rear was

covered in a loincloth—her front wasn't covered, so this was presumably the business end—but there was enough open flesh for me to leave a blossoming red hand mark, just like the ones disobedient kids got when they were in trouble.

"Eep?!"

In contrast to her cutesy squeal, the zentaur reflexively kicked back her hind legs—only after I'd taken my leave, though. I knew too well that the space just behind a horse was the most dangerous: Holter had carved that lesson deep into my bones very early in life. Had our family beast of burden not been kind enough to go easy on me, I probably wouldn't have ever been able to eat solids again.

"What's wrong? Naughty children deserve a spanking!"

"You! Argh! You little shiiit!"

Out of colorful language at last, she spat at me in Rhinian while landing a frighteningly dexterous one-eighty turn. Kicking off her back legs, she twirled around like the needle of a compass—no doubt a maneuver she'd spent untold hours perfecting in the hopes of hedging against her kind's natural weakness to fighting enemies positioned behind her. With her front half came the war axe, hovering parallel to the ground at a troublesome waist level.

The attack itself was gorgeous. It was as smart as it was strong, and the pure bloodlust it carried could not have been the product of half-hearted training. This was the shining brilliance of a honed warrior—a jewel, enchanting to all who seek the pinnacle of strength.

But it wasn't quite there.

I made a read based on the way she'd tightened up that she wasn't going to go past me with a parting shot, but that she instead had some means of reaping me from behind without giving up her position. Deciding it was time for a game of jump rope, I hopped straight into the air.

Though this game would see me losing my legs if my timing was any bit off, the feat turned out to be easier than I'd hoped on account of my not being weighed down by armor. The danger ripped past me in an instant, and I pressed

the point of my blade against her neck upon landing.

In lieu of a verbal inquiry, I asked whether she was satisfied yet by slapping her cheek with Schutzwolfe's tip.

"Urp! Grgh... Hngh..."

"The arteries in your neck, gone. In fact, I could've taken off your whole head had I swung while you were still moving. You're not undead, are you? Don't tell me you'd be able to survive *that* too."

Her pride as a warrior had been too much for the zentaur to give up. No matter how many times I'd held back a lethal blow, she hadn't stopped—she *couldn't* have stopped. But now, she finally froze.

I could sympathize. Seeing all that she'd worked for amount to nothing against an opponent who was just playing—though in truth, I'd had to remain alert the whole while—was sure to draw out a passionate response. It wasn't mere stubbornness: this martial prowess was the cornerstone of her confidence. As it fell apart around her, all she could do was desperately cling to the diminishing foundation of her ego.

It only made her situation sadder. She had the heart not to ask the world for power, but rather to earn that strength herself and use it as a pillar of her identity...so why had dignity left her behind? That was the key to a beautiful warrior: as hard as it was to come by, it was the most precious element. With it, she would have been truly stunning.

"Still want to fight?" I asked.

For a moment, she stood perfectly still...until eventually, she unhanded her axe. It crashed into the dirt with enough force to make me flinch; now that the fight was over, an awful chill ran down my spine. Was the thing enchanted to multiply its weight or something? I *swear* that it shouldn't have made a noise that loud, even if it was solid steel.

"Waaaaaaaaah! *Waaaaaaaaaah!*"

I'd been waiting to see what kind of excuse she'd come up with next, but in a bewildering twist, the zentaur began bawling.

Most of her upper body was dedicated to housing her heart and lungs, and it showed in her deafening cries. It was the kind of sound that could incapacitate a rioting crowd; I'd covered my ears with Hands before I could think twice.

Tears and snot dribbled down her upturned face unchecked—she was no different from a toddler. Her arms dangled lifeless by her sides, but each fist was wound so tightly that her nails had broken skin.

Huh... I didn't see that coming.

As you might have already realized, I didn't intend to kill her.

Rather, the longer we fought, the more one intrusive thought came to dominate my mind: *It'd be such a waste to let a fighter so skilled walk the path of an unprincipled vagabond.*

When she was fully present in the art of combat, she had truly been glowing. We shared the same desire to grow stronger, and that overflowing ambition had enchanted me. Her love, her hunger, her *longing* for the peak was so pure that it made me wonder whether others saw me as I did her.

Partway through, I'd begun treating our bout like a lesson in the hopes that I might be able to beat some virtue into her. I hadn't thought I'd make her *cry*.

"Um, hey. You, uh, weren't *weak* or anything—"

"WAAAAAAAAAAAAH!"

Crap, I made it worse. Maybe it was one of those times where trying to console her as the person who'd beaten her in the first place would just rub salt in the wound. *I guess my only choice is to wait it out like any other kid's tantrum.*

I awkwardly scratched my head, put Schutzwolfe back in her sheath, and took a seat on the ground. The Dioscuri looked on at their distant, distant cousin's tirade with little interest and huffed at me impatiently.

Sorry, boys. Give me another minute.

Figuring I'd patiently wait it out, I pulled out my pipe to pass the time.

[Tips] Zentaurs are a demihuman people originating somewhere from the Central Continent's center to its eastern reach, and were once feared throughout the land as the Living Scourge. In modern times, generations of intermarriage have given rise to some whose upper halves more closely resemble the peoples west of the desert; still, the majority of zentaurs are not native to the Rhinian region.

Though their massive builds and superhuman strength make them terrific in battle, they are incredibly clumsy with their hands. Furthermore, their size makes it difficult to design suitable architecture for them, and in an age of cultural advancement, they have been reduced to just another of the many kinds of people that walk the planet.

From the moment the zentaur began crying to when she finally managed to flush out her entangled emotions, half an hour had to have passed—it had been long enough that I'd burned through all the leaves in the magically stretched bowl of my pipe.

I wordlessly offered her a handkerchief, and she began wiping down her slushy face without reserve; at the end of it all, she loudly blew her nose into it. Now, I wasn't going to demand that she wash it or anything, but wouldn't a normal person at least be a *bit* embarrassed to hand off their oozing snot?

Leaving me to pinch a dripping rag, the zentaur sniffled her red nose once more and arrogantly proclaimed, "With how strong you are, you *might* even be worthy of being my husband... I bet everyone'd welcome me back if I brought someone like you home."

You sure are a creative sore loser.

Still, I was once more reminded that she had the makings of a warrior: no matter how thoroughly their pride was shattered, a champion had to collect the pieces and rise to the next occasion with a newly cast heart.

I couldn't count how many times Sir Lambert had pummeled the ego out of me. If that man saw someone as a fighter, he pulled no punches—even at age seven. Overwhelming pain had nearly caused me to give up on melee combat entirely on many occasions; on many more, he'd tweaked his handicaps just as I

was starting to find my footing so as to nip any budding seeds of confidence. It was in part thanks to him that I never lost perspective on my incomplete nature, even as I'd gotten stronger over the years.

"Sorry, but a wife who can't even threaten my life sounds even worse than a weak bodyguard."

"Urk..."

The groveling zentaur had scrounged up all her will to fire back with a cheeky one-liner; when I sent it right back her way, her voice caught in her throat and her eyes began to mist up again. Her horse ear was slanted to the side. If they worked in the same way as normal horses', it was either a sign of total relaxation or a foul mood—I could guess which.

"But," I said, "I'll take care of you for a little while."

"Bwha?"

"If I leave right now, how do you plan to survive?"

"Er, well..." She folded her arms, fidgeted with her front feet, and averted her gaze.

Friendless and penniless, all this zentaur had left was her skill in battle. Naturally, her options were limited. The most normal route would be to ask a fellow traveler or a merchant crew to take care of her, offering to work in exchange for an honest meal—but if she'd been the sort of commendable soul to do that, we wouldn't be here at all.

No, she would most likely end up finding some other poor schmuck to bully into a bad deal.

If I didn't want to kill her, then I believed that I was obligated to not let my choice cause trouble for those around me. Both to not let her starve and to not let her wreak more havoc, I felt it was best to take her with me.

Truthfully, it had all been over the moment I'd internalized her waste of talent: something in my recycled soul was aching to fix her. Come on, the image of her as a proud beacon of chivalry was exciting, wasn't it? Even though I was fully aware that I was simply pushing my own ideals onto someone else, I

couldn’t help but wish to see her at her most beautiful.

“Letting someone with your skill walk the lands without any sense of the dignity that power requires would be to let a scourge plague the world. If you want me to watch you slip into the path of robbery before my eyes, then this time, I won’t be using the blunt of my blade.”

“B-But I’m a *warrior*—a proud member of the Hildebrand tribe! After all the honors I’ve won on the battlefield, I’m not gonna tag along with some mensch who—”

“If you want to call yourself a warrior, then act like one! Is grumbling after a defeat what you call pride?!” As soon as I raised my voice, she recoiled. Regardless of where she came from or how she was brought up, my argument was too sound for her to talk back. “Get yourself together and pack your things. I’ll teach you what true valor is.”

“...You sure talk big. How much of a warrior are *you*, then?”

“Enough of one that I’d never lose to you.”

Speak in terms of victor and loser, and anyone who walks this path has no choice but to fall silent. Her frustration was written plainly on her face, but it seemed that for all the swirling thoughts in her head, she was earnestly contemplating what to do. As vexing as it was to listen to someone who’d just beaten her silly, there was no getting around the reality that her stomach would run empty eventually; she didn’t even have money or proper equipment to survive on the road. With the balance of power firmly decided by our duel, refusing here would be to abandon the last shred of her dignity as a combatant.

Most of all, she seemed to have a hunch for what I’d do if she tried to flee.

Adventurers were no strangers to courses of action that would make more ethical persons balk, and I personally had no qualms about fighting dirtier than sin if my opponents deserved it. Yet I believed that we were subject to a bare minimum standard of decency, and letting my fleeting sympathy turn into someone else’s tragedy crossed it.

Light pranksters could get off with a thumb; repeat offenders necessitated a wrist or two; those who *still* didn’t learn had no choice but to offer up their

necks. But in the case of a zentaur, her whole body was a weapon. Even if she could no longer hold an axe, her hooves would be enough to threaten any traveler ill equipped for battle. To cut off her legs, though, would be the same as death—it would be more humane to just end things quickly.

Choose. I rested my left hand on the edge of Schutzwolfe's sheath, and she finally hung her head in defeat.

"Fine, *fine*, jeez... I'll go and pack up my stuff."

"Very good."

Thankfully, I wouldn't have to draw blood today.

I was sure that some would call me arrogant for my self-centered, self-righteous decision. But I was too honest to lie to myself, and I didn't want to see this zentaur waste her potential.

This wasn't to say that I had anything against the wet workers who made a living off shady murder; my career path involved doing the same if the price was right. The zombified adventurer who, even in death, had refused to unhand his beloved blade in a disgus—*terrifying* display of loyalty had possessed beautiful skill, perfectly suited for his weapon of choice. Miss Nakeisha's artistry was confined to unseen shadows, yet she carried herself with respect and threw the whole of her heart behind a beautiful lust for victory.

I sought purity in both technique and philosophy. The zentaur was an aging oil work of a dragon whose eye had been lost to decaying paint; the thought that a little retouching could show me something more than the everyday knaves in my path had me giddy. Those childhood days I'd spent arguing which epic hero would have been the strongest left me unwilling to abandon the prospect of adding another to the list.

Sure, she'd started off by going for a lethal kick, but I'd been taunting her to that end—we'll call it even.

No matter what anyone else said, I would ride and die by this feeling.

"Once you've gotten your baggage sorted out, you'll be carrying it yourself. My horses have enough to handle already."

“Whaaat?! Why?! But you have *two* of them!”

“Don’t you ‘why’ me! What kind of warrior can’t take care of their own belongings?! You better not forget that this is how you ended up penniless in the first place!” I slapped her rear forward and shouted, “Go!”

Oh so begrudgingly, the zentaur began reorganizing the tent she’d made a mess of. The adroit handling she’d displayed with her weapon was nowhere to be found, to the point where I was shocked she’d managed to make her way out of her homeland at all.

“Oh... How do I fold this again? Dammit, when was the last time I did this?”

Although she continued to grumble the whole while, she looked like she at least *had* known how to use her gear at one point. From the way she had to stop and remember, though, it seemed that she’d been leaving it to others for a while. Both the way she folded cloth and the way she tied string would leave uncertainty in the final product’s stability, so I’d likely have to double-check her work.

“Ah?! Where’d the tent bag go?! Those *bastards*!”

“A big sack is always useful, so I can see why they’d take it. What I’m more curious about is how you managed not to wake up if they were hauling out *everything*.”

“I mean... I *would’ve* woken up if they’d bumped into me.”

That wasn’t even close to an excuse. She must’ve seen her traveling mates as pure servants. While I didn’t jump out of bed at the slightest sound when I was sleeping next to Elisa, Mika, or Margit, I’d still notice if someone came *into my tent*. Frankly, she was just lucky they hadn’t decided to kill her over pent-up grudges.

Sensing she was stuck, I cut a length from the rope I’d packed so that she could tie up her tarp and support beam. Her rewrapped weapon—though the blade poked through from where she’d ripped the veil—and armor chest went with it, and I oriented everything as best I could so that it sat evenly on her back.

“I’m supposed to be a warrior,” she moped with a heavy sigh. “Why am I

being treated like a dumb packhorse?”

“Have you not considered that maybe your party left you because you never helped carry anything?”

“Shut up. I bought them donkeys—that was my contribution.”

“Donkeys? Those looked like mules to me.”

“Huh? Wait, *what*?! Those weren’t donkeys?! Did I get them mixed up in Rhinian?”

“Or maybe you learned the words correctly, but someone swindled you. Just to clarify, mules are mixes of donkeys and horses.”

“Wha—those cheats!”

An ass can’t spot a jackass, I guess. I wasn’t being totally precise with my language here, but I felt the joke fit; for whatever reason, donkeys were considered to be symbols of slow wits on this half of the continent.

The zentaur must’ve been used to traveling completely empty-handed, because her meager belongings were enough to warrant an impromptu jog to check her balance. Meanwhile, I went to go fetch the Dioscuri—they’d gotten so bored that they’d wandered off to snack on some underbrush—so we could leave.

“By the way,” she suddenly said as I rode up, “you still haven’t given me your name.”

I squinted at her for a bit, and she shrugged in resignation. Trying to coax out a superior’s name before giving one’s own wasn’t just an affront to some chivalric code—it was an affront to standard manners. I penciled in some etiquette training in the back of my mind: if she was going to stay in the Empire, then she would need to learn how to do as the imperials did. Upholding one’s own values was fine, but if she wanted me to respect her way of doing things, she’d need to show some respect for mine first; trying to force things without establishing any attempt at effort was the work of a small child.

“My name is Dietrich. Dietrich of the Hildebrand tribe.”

Setting aside her people’s name, “Dietrich” had me a bit confused. Perhaps

she meant Deedlit, but that name would be much better suited for a methuselah—er, more importantly, she'd given a *Rhinian* name.

"But Dietrich is a man's name, and an imperial one, at that. Aren't you from the northern islands?"

"Ugh, you're so picky. Back home, centaurs—er, zentaurs don't have 'man' names or 'woman' names. Having to sort out which is which all the time is such a waste of time."

"Uh-huh."

"Look, my name *was* Derek, but I figured people here wouldn't be used to it or know how to say it, so I changed it to Dietrich, okay?!"

As strange as I thought her choice of name was, I didn't comment on it out loud. Not making fun of foreign customs was beyond common sense. That said, I was intrigued: I'd read once that long ago, gender distinctions had been virtually nonexistent because boys and girls were raised similarly for the purpose of war. To those early militaristic groups, the only difference had been that one of the two sexes gave birth; if the Hildebrand tribe had traditions linked to this Living Scourge mindset, then they must have been a storied people.

Still, if I ever met a burly zentaur sharing a name with the Virgin Mary or Pope Joan, for example, I'd need to make a Strength check to keep my cheek muscles from turning up.

"And? May I ask the name of the oh-so-great warrior who beat me in battle?"

"Sure. My name is Erich, fourth son to Johannes of Konigstuhl. I don't know how long our paths will cross for, but let's get along."

And so, my solo journey came to an end.

Unfortunately, the addition of a traveling buddy wasn't going to mean I could kick back and relax. She was only trailing along because I'd won the duel, and there wasn't any telling if or when she'd try to attack in my sleep.

Yet the hope that I might be able to turn her into a venerable warrior was worth it to me.

Earlier, Dietrich had mentioned that “everyone” would welcome her back if she brought home a strong groom. Either she’d been bullied to the point where she’d run away, or the authorities around her had thrown her out in the hopes that independence would make her grow up—that was my best guess as to why she was all the way out in the imperial countryside.

In essence, I wasn’t alone: there was a chance her tribe wanted her to learn some dignity too. Helping her realize why she’d been chased out and what made for a true warrior didn’t sound like a bad time at all. The streets would see one less highwayman, she would return home a matured hero, and I would get to polish off a gem otherwise left buried in dirt.

Of course, this all hinged on an assumption—if the Hildebrand tribe was full of ruthless savages, I’d be doing them a real disservice...but hey, the other points stood true no matter what. It’d be fine, right?

[Tips] The northern archipelago is centered around a massive island directly north of the continent’s western reach. Although it is technically ruled by a royal family with a supporting parliamentary system, the area’s instability causes the throne to change hands at a breakneck pace. Sometimes, the crown is even worn by foreign invaders—suffice it to say, the people of the Empire regard the region as a land of brutes and barbarians.

After three days, it’s easy to get a read on a person’s strengths and weaknesses: both their limits as a person and the physical limits of their build.

“You sure are clumsy...”

“Shut! Up!”

My days on the road with Dietrich thus far had gone without incident, but it was hard to say that things were progressing smoothly.

I found myself face-to-face with a campfire that didn’t seem all too wieldy to use. Er, perhaps that was short-selling it: the only reason my brain could process the haphazard pile of rocks as a “campfire” and not the work of a five-year-old trying to build a castle was because it had resulted from me specifically asking for a campfire.

“You can’t put up your tent properly. You can’t wash your clothes. You can’t even set up a fire... How in the world did you survive this long?”

“*All* zentaurs are like this! That’s why we always keep a bunch of servants and staff!”

Red in the face, the zentaur angrily shook her hopelessly clumsy fists. Where had the astonishing poise and agility she’d shown in battle gone?

In fairness, Dietrich was huge. She remained as tall as an average mensch when squatting at her lowest, and that build lent her to handling massive axes or drawing great bows that a smaller person would have trouble making budge; her bumbling touch when it came to the finer things was the price for that power.

Sadly for her, an ineptitude for sitting down and working made her practically useless at *every* kind of productive skill. She could just barely get her tent up because it had been specifically designed with zentaurs in mind; everything else wasn’t even worth asking about. At most, she could be counted on to simply carry things from place to place or to use her marksmanship to hunt game. While it was nice to let someone stronger do the exacting task of hauling water back to our campsite, it wasn’t like we were filling a bath out on the road—I didn’t ever *need* her to bring a zentaur’s full load worth of water. If this were a micromanageable empire-building sim, she would be the overspecialized combat unit that takes up more resources than she’s worth in the early stages of the game.

I could see how the rise of civilization had linked to the Living Scourge’s decline. They could eke out acceptable results for basic tasks if they had custom tools, but complex endeavors like architecture and metallurgy were impossible like this. No wonder the zentaur family in Konigstuhl had gone around helping out their neighbors instead of buying their own farm: they would have surely struggled to keep it afloat.

“You were the one who told me to leave it to you when I asked. All you had to do was tell me you couldn’t do it.”

“But...”

“But what? Is it that embarrassing to admit to a lowly mensch that you can’t

do something?”

“I... I just don’t want anyone to look down on me.”

I reoriented the stones into a proper rim, tossed the firewood I’d foraged into the center, and lit it ablaze. I’d learned on day one that Dietrich wasn’t built to pick things off the ground either, and the daily tasks of life had all quickly fallen to me. It was clearer now why she’d skipped the option of robbery to try and force me to be her servant. Despite how strong she was, she couldn’t get by without someone else’s help.

“Admitting to your own limits isn’t something to be ashamed of. In fact, I’d say it’s orders of magnitude more embarrassing to claim that you *can* do something only to come up short—being underestimated is nothing compared to that. It’s not as if you don’t have redeeming qualities, so why not be honest about your strengths and weaknesses from the very beginning?”

Yet for all my nagging, there were parts of zentaur culture that were downright ingenious.

First, they were comfortable handling blades in spite of their overall clumsiness, and Dietrich could take apart a fresh catch in half the time it would take me. Better yet, her work was clean, and she preserved the pelts and guts in pristine condition. Yesterday, I’d inadvertently begun applauding when I saw her skin a deer; as someone who brute-forced my skill in this field with Enchanting Artistry, watching her masterfully peel hide from meat had left me awestruck.

And as simple as they were, I’d kicked myself for not doing the same when I’d seen her midnight bells.

On the first night, Dietrich had pulled out a set of bells lying around in her armor chest, all strung up on a series of thin wires. The design was well thought out, with each metal ringer too heavy to make a clamor in a gentle breeze. Apparently, she’d stopped using them some time ago, since she had enough lackeys to keep watch, but I welcomed the traditional zentaur warning system with open arms since there were only two of us. In fact, I would want to buy a set off her if she had any to spare.

All this to say, Dietrich *did* have things to contribute. I didn’t see why we

couldn’t split up the tasks to our own strengths.

“Oh, yeah, yeah—fine. I get it.”

“One ‘yeah’ is enough. It’s impolite to repeat yourself.”

“Yes, Mr. Erich. There, is that good enough for you?”

“Very good.”

I ignored her sarcasm and began preparing dinner. Dietrich was always grumpy from all the scolding, but she perked up around suppertime. The way she paced back and forth behind me—she told me that zentaurs preferred to stand than sit—whenever I started cooking felt like she was looking for an opening, but I’d figured out by the second night that she was just excited to eat.

It had come as quite a surprise that she was so fond of simple porridge only broken up with a bit of venison. That night, she’d exclaimed, “Wow, this is amazing!” and wolfed down the whole pot in seconds. I yelled at her for not being considerate enough to leave me my share, but after that, I’d begun tripling our portion sizes and burning through a whole loaf of black bread a day.

Looking back, I supposed it was only natural for someone of her size. Horses ate about twenty kilograms of roughage a day, and a zentaur with similar physique was obviously going to need a lot of fuel. While Dietrich’s ability to eat more nutritious foods meant she didn’t have to ingest the same volume as Castor or Polydeukes, she still required three times as much as a mensch.

Even so, I hadn’t expected her to be so keen on my simple Campfire Cooking. I had a hunch that no one from her previous crew possessed any experience preparing meals.

“All right, I’m done. You can start eating without me, but remember—”

“‘Quietly and with good manners.’ I know. Jeez, not even my mom says stuff like that.”

“I only say it because you’ll stay fuller longer if you slow down.”

The way she chowed down as soon as I handed her a bowl and spoon was the spitting image of a little kid. It boggled my mind that she was older than me—at first, she’d even held her spoon backhanded in a balled-up fist, and shockingly,

begun loudly slurping straight from the bowl after the porridge had cooled off.

Compared to that, watching her continue to clink tableware together now almost seemed like good etiquette.

“Yum! How’d you get bird meat not to smell like this?! Ahh, and the pluck really fills me up!”

“For one, you brought back a great catch. On my end, I soaked the pheasant in liquor and vinegar to pull out the gamey stink. Oh, and I put in some herbs while I was boiling it. Glad to hear that it suits your palate.”

“Wow, I already thought the food here was better than back home, but your cooking’s even better than the restaurants’! Gimme more!”

“Here you go. But you know, I’m a bit disappointed it wasn’t ready for lunch instead.”

Dietrich had sniped this pheasant just before we’d taken our midday break. Although she’d been eager to eat it straight away, I’d convinced her to let it sit in the simple marinade until dinner.

However, imperial custom was to eat a hearty lunch to fuel the busiest part of the day, with sparser breakfasts and suppers. Straying off my usual rhythm didn’t sit the best with my stomach, but we didn’t have the luxury of cooler bags or refrigerators. Even preserved in liquor and vinegar, it wouldn’t be safe to keep meat for more than a day...but man, did I wish I could’ve had roasted pheasant for lunch.

“I don’t get why you’d say that,” Dietrich said. “Back home, it was normal to make dinner the biggest meal of the day.”

“Don’t you feel bloated at night if you do that, though?”

“Not really?”

My foreign companion seemed confused at the question but went back to nibbling a piece of black bread that would shatter my teeth. This was a prime example of a culture gap, I suppose. Despite being proud of how well the dish had turned out, I decided to keep my portion on the smaller side; besides, I didn’t have to worry about wasting food with Dietrich around.

“Whew, I’m full! It might actually be worth taking you back home if I get to eat this all the time.”

“Like I said, I don’t need—”

“‘A wife or bodyguard weaker than me.’ I *know*. That’s why we’re gonna spar to work off the food, right?”

Dietrich stretched out her arms, tossing the empty bowl to the side. She may have been the older one, but I felt like I’d suddenly been burdened with a disobedient little sister. I’d need to teach her to clean up after herself once the meal was done, but that could wait for another time; I’d just sour her mood if I pointed out everything all at once. For now, I’d give her a passing grade for paying her respects in the form of a compliment. I *would* have added dish washing to her responsibilities, but I held off knowing I’d blow a fuse if she ended up bending my cutlery.

We’d settled into a routine of light exercise following the last meal of the day, and squared up to spar; yet long after the sun had sunk, we noticed someone on the road heading toward us. The faraway sounds of carriages were supplemented by a smattering of footsteps.

At this time of day? The two of us stopped and cast our eyes toward the sound. Eventually, the dim, floating glow of a torch showed up in the distance. Slowly but surely, a scout emerged from the darkness, followed by three buggies and a handful of guards. Neither did the canopies bear an imperial crest nor did the crew fly a tax-collector’s flag; they were probably average merchants who’d hit a snag on the road and missed their chance to find an inn.

No illicit trader would be marching along with the lights on at this hour, after all. Those dealing in insidious markets simply hired crews with night vision to navigate off the beaten path; these people were almost certainly just unlucky civilians.

“Ugh, finally.”

“Gods, all this extra work, and for what?”

“I’m terribly sorry—I really am. But the straight path is so poorly maintained, and I feared the wheels wouldn’t be able to handle—”

“We *get it* already! How many times do you have to repeat yourself before you’ll shut up?!”

Yet just as I eased up thinking they wouldn’t be a threat, a tense set of voices came into earshot. Though the middle-aged man speaking to the bodyguards seemed like the owner of the convoy, the conversation did not follow the pattern of employer and employee.

While the vehicles were somewhat old, they were well kept and roofed with tarps free of holes. I caught a glimpse of the interior, and the neatly tied cargo in the back spoke to honest work—not to mention how the owner seemed to know the lay of the land and had had the wherewithal to take a detour when the situation called. For my money, the merchant seemed like a dependable employer. If the shortest path could risk a broken wheel or axle, then it was a smart move to prioritize the sure success of the trip. In the worst case, they could’ve wasted half a day trying to fashion spare parts out of nearby trees, only to make replacements incapable of carrying their goods to the destination.

My issue lay with the bodyguards who were bellyaching over a few extra hours and a night on the road.

Put bluntly, they had no idea what they were doing; if I really tried to be polite, they were unendowed with professionalism. The Bloody Manes had at least cleared the bar for the bare minimum amount of structure needed to keep a band of soldiers-for-hire in line; not only did these amateurs not have that, but their gear was significantly worse.

Judging from the lack of a banner, they weren’t mercenaries; however, they didn’t exactly look like a gang of local lads who’d just picked up their first spears for tonight’s job. By process of elimination, they were probably adventurers.

Adventurers had their roots in the Age of Gods, where the powers that be had tasked the bravest of heroes with surmounting every challenge...but nowadays, they were just cheap labor to inflict dirty work upon. In exchange for being less specialized in combat than the average merc, the hollow label of “adventure” could justify pretty much anything, and society had long since accepted this versatility.

But of course, that flexibility came hand in hand with degrading quality. Epic

heroes who upheld the glory of those who came before them were few and far between: both virtue and skill were woefully scarce.

As someone who planned on joining their ranks, seeing the deterioration of my peers-to-be in such vivid detail had me feeling ill at ease. I wasn't going to start spouting some teenage ideal about how the world ought only to be good, but this was just sad.

"Gods, it's bullshit all the way down. Everything you ask for is a pain in the ass."

"I'm sorry—I'm so terribly sorry. I'll be sure to increase your pay for the extra days we spend—"

"Of course you will! But what *I'm* saying is that that ain't enough! I'd need double the pay to put up with this shit anymore!"

"*D-Double?!* No, I can't! In any case, the Association should have explained to you before taking the job that carrying cargo would be part of your responsibilities, and what's more..."

That said, the merchant's timidity wasn't helping. Haughtily pushing around one's bodyguards was obviously one way to get abandoned on the road, but he shouldn't have had anything to fear if he'd hired these men through the Adventurer's Association. Being an intermediary organization, the Association went beyond connecting workers to jobs: it oversaw the quality of the work being performed; it wouldn't hurt for him to hold his ground more firmly.

"They sure are going at it," Dietrich said. "If that guy's the one paying, then why doesn't he tell them off harder?"

"He probably isn't used to dealing with rougher sorts. Bad luck for him—those goons look really lowbrow."

"*That's* lowbrow? He wouldn't last a second in the slums up north. I'm shocked he can run a business like that."

"When you live your life with four walls at your side, being nice can be a weapon of its own. Negotiating business is a whole different matter from shouting down your opponent before a battle."

“Really?”

“Really.”

“*Lame.* I guess I’m never starting a business.”

Dietrich sure did like to concern herself with putting on airs. On top of grumbling about not wanting to be looked down upon, she also constantly complained that tying things up on her back wasn’t the proper look for a warrior.

Yet for all her fussing over appearances, she lacked the critical conception of her ideal self. Did she want to become a legendary fighter, remembered through the ages? Did she want to find a worthy opponent and best them in battle?

I saw myself in her: a greener version of me whom I’d left behind in a faraway world, buried underneath the years. She wanted to become so great and mighty that none would make light of her, but she didn’t know how to truly achieve greatness—she didn’t even know how to *look* the part.

Ugh, just watching her makes my stomach hurt. Despite believing in herself, she couldn’t win the approval of others, and on closer inspection, the basis for that confidence was missing in action. Unable to even begin imagining what life might be like a decade out, she was plagued by the questions of identity that, at worst, led young souls down the dark pathway of wishing for harm—for themselves or for others.

Argh... Seeing it in someone else was like an itch I couldn’t scratch. My diagnosis was that she suffered from the sequelae of middle-school syndrome, and there was no cure. The only medicine that offered temporary reprieve was a pillow and blanket.

Putting that aside, I decided to call off our sparring for the night. Swinging our weapons near a bunch of bodyguards with short fuses was just asking for a fight.

It seemed the rule of thumb about public order getting worse and worse the farther one was from a major city was true. Lady Agrippina liked to laugh at the “capital of vanity,” but I felt like some veneer of civility was necessary. Without

it, people were creatures too wicked for their own good.

“Let’s just pour some tea and call it a night. You can go to bed first, since you took the first watch last night.”

“Yay. Let me sleep until morning, will you?”

“You better be joking, or I’ll cut your hair even shorter than it is now.”

Dietrich put her hands on her head at my empty threat and hoofed it into her tent. We’d been talking about how zentaurs shave their heads after losing in a duel, and she’d mentioned that her hair had only just gotten long enough not to embarrass her. I hadn’t expected her to take me seriously... Did I actually look mean enough to do that?

On a separate note, I’d been meaning to replenish our rapidly depleting stock of food—today’s huge supper hadn’t helped—if we ever came across a caravan, but I made up my mind to wait for morning. They seemed to have their hands full with setting up camp in the dark, and I had a bad feeling about the situation. I hadn’t *not* felt a bad feeling in days, to be fair, but the one creeping on me now was worse than usual. The adventurers seemed remarkably upset, and it was looking doubtful the merchant would be able to calm them down.

Ugh, there had to be something wrong here—was the world actually this turbulent? Was *I* the one in the wrong for expecting any semblance of peace on my journey?

I’m just trying to get home, man...

[Tips] The Adventurer’s Association is an international organization originally conceived to connect capable heroes with the dire tasks of extinguishing giant specters, quelling rampaging beasts, and slaying vicious dragons. Once upon a time, gods of varying nations set aside their differences to found the institution; nowadays, all that remains is its scope. Though the Association covers the whole of the continent’s western reach, it has been reduced to a one-stop-shop of dispatch labor.

Anger is the most explosive of human emotions; it is also the shortest-lasting.

That was why I'd been hoping that things would sort themselves out by morning, but I'd been dead wrong.

I rose in the early morning to fit in the practice swings I'd been denied last night, and knocked back a quick breakfast after I was nicely warmed up. After all that, the caravan company emerged, and was *still* going at it. The bodyguards were once again arguing for double the pay, all done outside the Association's bounds.

An average adventurer earned about five librae for security detail, and someone with little to no experience would bottom out at around fifty assarii. However, that wasn't reflective of the cost: the buyer paid an extra twenty percent in Association fees and imperial taxes. The crown knew free-spirited adventurers weren't going to report their revenue properly, and this was its way of ensuring its cut.

As should have been obvious from the safeguards in place, it was illegal for an adventurer to directly rack their employer for extra pay. Not only did it put the hiring party in a bind, but neither the Association nor the Empire were fond of losing out on their income. One could argue for extra compensation if the work didn't match up to the conditions initially laid out, but that still involved official mediation.

Trying to get an extra tip for a job well done was one thing, but asking for *twice* the money was pure nonsense.

"You pay us double *right now* or we walk!"

"What?! Then you won't be getting paid at all! Any disputes should be settled through the—"

"Shut your trap, you scrawny peddler! You already forced all your shit work onto us—now we've gotta pick up the slack on money too?! Maybe I oughta teach you a thing or two about making a damn living!"

Dietrich was leisurely brushing her teeth with a wooden brush, but I was on high alert as I watched the exchange across a simmering pot of red tea. I didn't know what had set this whole ordeal off, but it no longer seemed like something that could be neatly tidied up with words alone.

“I’ve had enough! We’ve let you speak your piece, and all that comes out is drivel! Don’t look down on us! You don’t know a damn thing about business! If you wanna play bodyguard, you should go home to your mothers and learn some manners first!”

A middle-aged man stepped out of one of the carriages and shouted down the adventurer in an attempt to defend the caravan leader. He’d been packing up to depart until now, but as his face entered the light it became easy to see the resemblance between him and the first merchant.

It had already been clear that they were family on account of the convoy’s small size; they were probably brothers or cousins, or maybe uncle and nephew. He had a traveler’s final friend dangling from his waist, but sadly, I didn’t get the sense that he knew how to wield that dagger any more than a country bumpkin looking to show off.

“The fuck d’you say?! You wanna go?! You better watch your mouth if you know what’s good for you!”

“No, *you* watch *your* mouth, punk! There’s a reason you thugs are cheaper than a cart of apples! If you want twice the pay, then work your asses off to earn it!”

“B-Ben! That’s enough!”

“Let me go, Uncle Rolf! Why the hell should I have to sit silent as these lowlifes talk us down?!”

I agreed on principle, but buying into the fight being sold was ill advised. From a swordsman’s perspective, the five adventurers lacked even the slightest semblance of leadership or unity; I could’ve wiped the floor with them at age ten. But as an honest merchant leading a peaceful life, they seemed more than the man could chew.

“You asking to die, dumbass?! I ain’t here to get talked down to by a penny-pinching merchant!”

“Wah?!”

Look, see? I knew this would happen. The adventurer gestured with his hand on his sword—I couldn’t let this go on any longer. This had escaped the bounds

of mere negotiation.

“Hm? Erich?”

“Just wait here. I’ll be back in a second.”

After preaching my lofty morals to Dietrich, it wouldn’t do to sit idly by in the face of reckless violence. On a more personal note, it would weigh on me if I so blatantly ignored the opportunity to stop needless bloodshed when it arose.

“Excuse me. May I have a moment?”

“The hell *you* want, brat?! Fuck off—this ain’t none of your business!”

“My business or not, I can’t simply ignore this ruckus being made first thing in the morning. How can I enjoy my tea with this chaos?”

“Who the fuck cares about your tea?! How ’bout you walk your little ass back to Miss Bodyguard over there and suck on her tits like the baby you are before I suck on ’em for you?!”

The man was so cartoonishly vulgar that my will to put up any front of courtesy rapidly depleted. Dietrich may have been just as crass in her language, but at least she had the decency to turn it off in normal conversation.

“Don’t let your big escort get to your head, kid. That piece of crap around your hips won’t do anything for you if you keep sticking your dumb neck where it don’t belong—now scram!”

“P-Please calm down! He’s just a boy!”

“Shut the fuck up!”

The peace was broken: the caravan director tried to cover for me, immediately prompting the adventurer to wind up a punch. Then again, I wouldn’t have been here at all had the situation been resolvable by peaceful means. I stepped between the two, rerouting the aggressor’s arm by the elbow.

“Whoa?!”

He’d committed his weight backward in preparation for a full swing, and a light shove was all it took to tip him over. Being manhandled by a young kid hadn’t been part of his calculations: he painfully crashed onto his rear without

breaking his fall.

Pathetic. This man was the leader of his party—he was the only one with a sword holstered as a daily carry—and yet he couldn't even catch himself. If I'd swept his legs instead, he would've gone down face first.

"The merchant is right. You need to calm down. What kind of guard harms the object of his protection? Let's talk this over rationally. To begin, this area isn't the sort of dangerous region that would justify a doubled—"

"Kill him!"

Yeah, figures. As soon as the groaning adventurer gave the order, I kicked in his jaw to shut him up. I might've broken a few teeth in the process, but I was honestly sick of playing nice with him.

"Want any heeelp?" Dietrich called over.

"No need! Just watch the tea for me." With a casual answer, I rolled my neck and sauntered toward the angry pack of adventurers. There were four, all mensch, and each armed with a spear, club, or axe; no magic, no horses, no priests.

"Y-Young man!"

"Ah, please stand back. I'll make sure to keep things from moving toward you, but it won't hurt to be safe."

In a tabletop setting, the GM would have stayed my hand from reaching for the dice. "Ahem, you beat up the thugs in whatever way you think is coolest. Do you guys want me to narrate the fight, or...?"

And that was exactly how it went.

Each foe went down in a single hit. I jammed the heel of my palm into their fleshy chins, necks, and stomachs until they were all out cold. Frankly, they were much too squishy: they literally hadn't trained enough to bulk up with hardened muscle. If they didn't go home and start exercising, they'd never withstand a punch.

I hadn't expected an engaging fight, but this was just...*soft*. Back home, Sir Lambert wouldn't have even let these chumps hold steel. They would've been

under his personal care, swinging fake wooden swords a hundred times a day—now *there* was an actual challenge. The Konigstuhl watch captain refused to count any imperfection in technique as a real swing, inflating the total count severalfold; that had been the breaking point for many of my peers.

"Incredible... With your bare hands too!"

"Unlike these feral mutts, my fangs choose their marks." I clapped off the dust on my hands and turned to the merchant. Seeing someone my age take out five adults had impressed him, so I took the opportunity to say, "These five fools won't even look the part of proper guards. You'd be much better off hiring the two of us. In fact, we'll do the job for whatever price you were offering them as an apology for disabling your security detail."

Three carriages made for a pretty big single-family company; they'd be a tantalizing mark for anyone whose path they crossed without an escort. Offering to solve a problem I'd helped cause felt a bit scammy, but hey, it wasn't *my* fault the adventurers were idiots.

If the deal fell apart on the part of the adventurers, the merchant would probably get his money back—with the difference in fees billed to these goons—so my proposition didn't come with any real drawbacks. At most, they'd lose out on raw manpower, but I didn't intend to be outdone by five nitwits who half-assed their jobs.

"Based on the direction you arrived from, I suspect we'll be taking the same path forward. We'd be willing to accompany you until you can hire more permanent replacements, if that sounds good to you."

"I—we would be happy to have you! Having someone as strong as you would be so very reassuring!"

"Then we'll begin preparing to leave—but do feel free to take your time. And please, leave these men to me. I'll be sure to give them a thorough warning."

With matters settled, my first order of business was to leave my seniors in the adventuring field a little threat. I didn't want them getting any vengeful ideas when they woke up, after all.

After a bit, I finished up and headed back to our camp. I planned on

apologizing to Dietrich for accepting work without her permission, but when I returned, she was busy thrusting her arms this way and that with a puzzled expression, mumbling, “Like this? No, it was more like...hah!”

“What are you doing?”

“You were doing some really fancy stuff with your hands, and I wanted to see if I could do it too. Is this stronger than punching someone with a closed fist or something?”

“Well, my fists are more likely to get hurt than their skulls with a normal punch. Instead, I tighten up my hands and arm to make a solid rod; from there, I can push out all the strength of my shoulder or elbow and can break jaws barehanded.”

“Oh... Mensch sure are weak. If that’s why you were doing it, I guess I don’t need to learn this. I can crush a skull with one hand if I get a good grip.”

She stretched her hands out toward me. They were riddled with calluses and, just as she’d claimed, big enough to cover my whole head—I guessed their disproportionately long arms were matched up with extra large hands. Trying to process that these were attached to her baby face caused my brain to glitch out.

“*Crush?*” I asked. “What kind of crazy grip strength do you have?”

“Well, I can’t do this yet, but there’s one warrior from my clan whose hands are so strong that he keeps breaking all his weapons in battle. So he usually ends up fighting unarmed, and I saw him pulverize a skull one time: it didn’t really shatter so much as it just started leaking from the weak bits. Like a *smush* kind of feeling? Or maybe more like *squelch*—”

“I’ll pass on the details, thank you. I won’t be able to enjoy my tea if I keep listening to—”

I was going to tell Dietrich that this sort of discussion wasn’t suitable right after a meal, when I noticed the pot of red tea was totally boiling over. I’d used a coarse enough tea bag to keep the insides from scattering, but at this rate, the flavor would go to waste!

“Hey?! I thought I told you to watch the tea!”

“I *am* watching it.”

“Don’t *just* watch it! All the fragrance will evaporate if you let it boil!”

“I’m telling you it’ll be the same!”

I didn’t know why I had to scold this older zentaur like a parent explaining things to a grade-schooler, but the road ahead was long.

I drank my share to not let it go to waste, and it was just as bitter as I’d expected. Dietrich took one sip, made a face, and said she didn’t want any more—as if I’d let her get away with that. In the end, I sat her down and we each suffered through half the terrible pot.

[Tips] As a general rule, adventurers must go through the Association both to accept work and be paid for it. While they *can* take urgent quests directly from a client on the spot, they must report the details and pay taxes after the fact if they wish to raise their internal evaluation.

The middle-aged man’s name was Gerulf, and he was the leader of a small family-owned caravan of five people. With him were his wife Ella, his nephew Benhardt—the one who’d put up a fight against the adventurers—his eldest son Rudiger, and his eldest daughter Klara. Rudiger was a few months into adulthood, whereas Klara was still a little ways off.

Not only was the entire party made up of noncombatants, but it included Mr. Gerulf’s unwed daughter; once introductions were finished, the reason he’d been deferential to a fault was obvious. While imperial culture didn’t place much stock in male chastity, the same could not be said of women, especially among mensch. A farm girl could get away with a history of romp and play, so to speak, but a merchant’s child would have trouble tying the knot with any respectable business partner.

Incredulous, I asked why they’d set off with so few people, and without the company of any other merchants at that. The answer was simple: they were understaffed.

Mr. Gerulf was to be the next director of a small but venerable sundries store

in the nearest town. His family business revolved around shipping goods to the rural villages in the region. Specifically, they mainly dealt in the tools and materials that enabled country folk to pick up side gigs while they were cooped up for the winter months—which meant they had to be pretty well off.

The story went that, one day, they'd gotten an urgent order. Many regions lacked the means to cheaply produce the requisite goods to pay their national taxes, and calling out wholesalers to buy up the difference was a regular affair. This time, a regular patron village had realized at the last minute that they didn't have what they needed, and the chief had requested that Mr. Gerulf's company head over with some textiles and threads.

According to the details of the plea, they were working off time the local magistrate had given them in an act of mercy; they needed the goods in ten days.

Unfortunately, the timing couldn't have been worse for Mr. Gerulf. The proprietors of the business—that is, his mother and father—were out of town on other business; since the store was family run, there were hardly enough people to go around. Alas, unable to leave a longtime customer out to dry, he'd mustered as many hands as he could, left his brother behind to hold the fort, and set off.

However, the short notice meant he hadn't had time to put together a proper set of bodyguards—what with the privately employed ones accompanying his parents—and so he'd turned to day-laboring adventurers. Throwing what he needed into a few carriages, he'd made his way out onto the road, only for *this* to be how things turned out.

Mr. Gerulf was an unlucky fellow, just like me. Had he not been so crunched for time, he could've asked around his business partners for dependable help, or at least vetted the adventurers he hired through an interview.

At least now they'd left the lawless frauds behind and picked us up to replace them. They welcomed us with roaring applause: I'd shown off my skills, and Dietrich was so blatantly strong that she'd ward off danger just by standing around in armor.

"Hey, c'mere," Dietrich whispered.

“Hm?”

We quickly found ourselves leading the convoy. Scouting ahead to spot traps and ambushes was essential, so we left the rear to Mr. Benhardt, who was trailing the buggies on foot.

Dietrich was clad in a set of scalemail she’d pulled out of her armor chest—and no, she hadn’t been able to put it on by herself—and she leaned over to tug on my leather-and-chain sleeve.

“I know we’re working for five people’s wages, but don’t you think we could’ve gone for ten? The last time I guarded a merchant, I got paid thirty librae a day.”

“Thirty?! Wow, that’s good money.”

“I mean, that isn’t all I’ve done. One time, I worked for some magistrate in place of his usual in-house duelist at an open challenge, and another time, I joined up with some feuding mercenaries and led my side to victory. I wasn’t upcharging you back when we first met, you know?”

“Huh, you really have been around. Now I can see why you’d been so insistent on your innocence back when you first upcharged me. How’d you convince your past employers to pay so well?”

“Jeez, it was a fair price... And all I have to do is sink an arrow from a hundred and fifty paces out. You know those corpses on the sides of the road? Just hit one in the neck from that far, and most people are happy to pay. Er, wait, that’s not the point—why are we working for so little, again?”

Dietrich continued to pester me for my reasoning, so I simply answered, “Only the coward turns a blind eye to justice ripe at hand.”

Mr. Gerulf was not in the wrong. The fault lay with the impatient adventurers, especially with how accommodating the merchant had offered to be in paying for any extra days of labor. At most, one could nitpick about how overly timid he’d been. Yet without trustworthy defenders and joined by his young daughter, it was hard not to understand why. There was no justification good enough to let him suffer right before my eyes; what kind of hypocrite would that have made me after all my moralizing to Dietrich?

“Ignore the plight of those around you and live in constant comfort—that is the quickest path to becoming a simple brute. I won’t tell you to serve others in pure charity, of course. But I think it’s important to keep in mind how the world at large will view your actions.”

“The world at large, huh?”

“Maybe the reason your clan chief sent you away without permanently exiling you was in hopes that you’d learn that.”

My last comment made Dietrich’s ear twitch: mostly missing as it was, the motion of her left ear was noticeable.

On the first day we’d begun traveling together, I’d asked her why she was out here away from home. If I was going to pay the expenses and take care of her day to day, I’d figured it was only fair to learn about what kind of person was in my company. After a long, deep think, she had laid out the story of how she’d ended up in the Empire.

Dietrich’s tribe, the Hildebrands, were the housecarls to a prominent noble up on the northern islands. She was the firstborn child to one of the most important families among her people; since archipelagic zentaurs treated boys and girls as equals, that made her first in line to eventually inherit a place at the clan council.

Around a year before we met, she’d set off to fight in what would become the first battle of a war for irrigation control. Spotting a crack in the enemy’s formation, she took off alone and managed to take the opposing general’s head.

That, in turn, went to her own head. Inflated with pride, she’d challenged the strongest warrior of her clan—the *hero* of her people—to a duel. Her reasoning was that *she* had been the one to slay the enemy’s frontline general, so it was wrong that *he’d* been the one to be most honored.

As you can see, she lost. One of the equine ears zentaurs prided themselves on was torn straight off in combat. Worse still, her people had a custom of growing out their hair until suffering a decisive defeat, and she had to bear the shame of a shaved head.

The clan chief called her into his tent after the loss to give her a lecture so brutal that Dietrich's face had scrunched up while recalling it.

"There is no shame in seeking to outdo your peers and earn glory in battle, but what you've done is barbaric. Worse still, you contested a joint decision made by the council and our *lord* to offer merits as they did. You dare throw mud across them by drunkenly picking a fight with the hero of our tribe?"

Yeah...that had been a rough episode to listen to. All I'd been able to do for her was pat her on the shoulder and offer hollow words of comfort.

Hearing out the details of the battle, Dietrich's advance had been nothing short of reckless. The original plan had been for an initial force of zentaurs to whittle down the enemy lines with a series of Parthian shots, with the armored cavalry swooping in to break up a weakened formation. Yet she'd ignored the whole stratagem, instead charging in before the opposing army was sufficiently thinned out.

Hungry for prestige, her fellow youths had quickly followed suit. The nonzentaur forces, confused by their allies' untimely advance charge, second-guessed their better judgment and pressed forward to create a chaotic melee. Thanks in part to the hero who would later pummel Dietrich in a fight, a coordinated reinforcement of heavy cavalry was enough to secure victory. Yet from their lord's perspective, they'd lost far more men than they had planned to.

Dietrich's target was just as bad as her timing. The general leading the front lines had been the enemy's first son: her noble master's strategy had been to either capture him as a hostage or to break his spirit so thoroughly that he'd never want to fight again. As important as irrigation rights were, there was always the looming threat of an invasion coming in from the mainland or an ambitious lord gunning for the position of high king. No source of water was worth losing important soldiers over.

Putting the regular rank and file aside, Dietrich's lord knew that the zentaurs were capable of spectacular things in battle, and had explicitly ordered them to capture the enemy prince alive. Apparently, Dietrich had forgotten that in the heat of battle and, in the critical moment, fallen back on the simple equation of

“kill important person equals glory.”

From the perspective of someone who’d dabbled in military planning, this was very much a palm-to-face situation—I was honestly impressed she hadn’t been executed for what was effectively insubordination. While she’d done a great service on the surface, the overall drawbacks to her scheme were so great that her total accomplishments dipped past neutral into negative territory.

After all, the enemy lord couldn’t back down if his first son was killed in battle. There was even a realistic possibility that he’d claim the killing was illegal on the basis that his son had been on a mere reconnaissance mission or what have you.

Yet despite it all, Dietrich hadn’t been executed or exiled, never to return—she had just been sent out on a journey alone.

I suspected that her clan council had thought her just as much of a waste as I had. She was incredibly strong in battle for her age, and with a bit of experience, she’d become a fine general; why else would she have been guaranteed a spot at the council? It was obvious they didn’t just accept anyone: when I’d asked her whether a simpleton would be allowed to join their ranks if they drew blood from a current council member, she’d angrily spat that a cripple—the most vicious slur in all zentaur culture—would be left out in the cold even if they were the chief’s own.

Yet it turned out that she needed good sense more than experience.

Alas, prudence was a skill hard to come by in the comfort of routine. Thus, they’d sent her away: not forever, but as a means to reflect and return home wiser.

From there, Dietrich had found it too awkward to stick around and drifted to the Empire of her own volition. Coincidence had brought our paths together, and I’d figured it was some kind of fate: I accepted my post and had decided to drill some sense into her. It was the best thing I could do for the world, for the people she would come across, and most of all, for Dietrich herself.

“But what’s the point of giving someone else a good deal for nothing?”

“It’s not for nothing. We’re getting paid, and more importantly, they were

nice enough to offer us free food. You know, I had half a month of rations packed until a *certain someone* couldn't help themselves and ate half of it in three days."

"Mrgh... B-But I'm bigger, and I'm faster, and I've got way more muscles too! So of *course* I eat more. See, I'm faster!"

Unable to contest the point that she ate ludicrous amounts, the zentaur's reasoning flew off in yet another strange vector. Upon reminding herself of her physical superiority, she galloped on ahead and began bragging from afar.

She wasn't wrong: even the fastest mensch needed double-digit seconds to sprint a hundred meters, and the most powerful of us could only lift half of what she could. Just looking at our raw physical stats, we truly were at the bottom of the pyramid.

"And yet," I said, "*I'm* stronger."

Silenced by the unwavering truth, Dietrich slowed down and dejectedly returned to match my pace.

Knowing that she'd been tossed out on account of her big ego, I'd need to teach her some discretion before we parted ways. Though, to be honest, maybe I wasn't one to talk in that regard...

[Tips] The northern archipelago abides by a similar feudal social structure to Rhine, but the constant wars and the lack of control exerted by any given high king skew things toward a more pragmatic paradigm. Unlike in the Empire, knight households are given equal importance to standard nobility: those who employ them honor them not as mere soldiers, but as housecarls.

A man stood, heaving heavy breaths. Another man lay dead at his feet.

Some time had passed since the caravan left this campsite behind, and the sole member of the adventurers' party who had been left unrestrained had untied the ropes binding his friends. This man had been let off easy, then woken up early to relay a message: "I'll turn the other way this time, so put yourselves together and lead an honest life." Having been outskilled and overwhelmed, the

messenger asked his leader to let them go home.

The leader snapped.

The boss of these hooligans had eaten a kick to the face and lost two front teeth for his trouble. Teeth were an important social marker in the Empire: losing *front* teeth in particular was proof of eating a blow straight in the kisser. Although some regions saw a missing tooth or two as a telltale sign of a manly history of battle, the local consensus was that it was the mark of a loser.

Fake teeth existed, but they weren't very good: at most, they could be used to *look* the part. The clumsiness in his mouth was here to stay forever. Unless he wanted to put the life of swords behind him, he'd at least need to avenge himself if he wanted to have a foot to stand on as a fighter—and oh, did he intend to get even.

One look at the man's face was enough to tell as much, and yet his spineless subordinate had begged to go home without a second thought. So he'd stabbed him.

Well, that wasn't the *only* reason he'd stabbed him.

The leader thought he needed to show those who remained that he was still strong, lest he become mere prey to be torn apart. His order was "No survivors." Unable to challenge his decision, the crew set out on their twisted quest for revenge.

Luckily enough, they were going after a caravan—one led by a man who opted for detours in the name of safety. A handful of able men packing light could easily overtake them.

The leader spoke: he knew a guy who could help in the next canton over. You see, bandits were not groups of filthy cretins constantly huddled up in the woods as they waited for their next victims. The Empire's vendetta against brigandry meant that the majority of criminals only worked part-time. Only in the remotest of locations could one find outlaws hiding in an abandoned castle or fortress; that kind of overt headquarters was a prime target for the imperial patrol to clear out in one-sided slaughter.

Most were dutiful workers weak to depraved temptations. Evading the

merciless eyes of patrolmen, these everyday citizens only bared their robbers' hides when an easy mark presented itself. No matter how ruthlessly the law was upheld, the leering eyes on the road and the criminals they belonged to, hungry for ill-gotten gains, were infinite. The man's contact was just another one of those people.

Once their wounds had been treated, the adventurers set off swiftly. Soon, they'd punt that blond brat's head into the clouds, tear through everything that moronic merchant owned, and be free of this stinging slight on their pride.

[Tips] Very few bandits can make a living solely through crime. Most repeat offenders are simple country folk or mercenaries who seize illicit opportunities when they arise.

Three days had passed since we'd joined up with Mr. Gerulf and company; three days remained until we reached their destination.

Man, was this nice. Sleeping with someone else on lookout did wonders for my fatigue, and I could feel the fog in my brain dissipating. Better yet, we could indulge in the luxury of boiling water to properly wipe ourselves clean.

I know I'd talked about how cool it'd be to travel solo when first departing, but let me make things clear: journeying alone *sucked*. My preconceived notions had all been formed in a safe world with scientifically engineered gear everywhere. Here, I didn't have an insulated sleeping bag vetted for subzero temperatures, nor was I surrounded by the kind of infrastructure that let me drive to a hot spring on my way home from a long trip.

But even as I swore in my heart to never venture off by myself again, I couldn't exactly say that my current situation was all too cozy.

"Would you like some red tea, Sir Erich?"

"Ah, Miss Klara. Thank you very much."

After finishing the final watch shift leading into sunrise, I was waiting for breakfast to be made when Mr. Gerulf's daughter came to serve me tea. Miss Klara was a nice and cheerful mensch girl whose mannerisms made her relaxing

to be around. Among all the people I'd associated with lately, she was the most normal—so normal that she wrapped back around to being unique.

Whether friend or not, my contacts since leaving Konigstuhl had all been strong characters. I knew I'd crossed paths with enough lookers to break my sense of beauty, and—as rude as it was to say—Miss Klara's artless charm was a breath of fresh air. She had a few freckles, but they only brought her closer to the idyllic archetype of a country girl. Interacting with someone as innocent as her was new and heartwarming.

That said, having her wait on me as "Sir" Erich was *not* comfortable.

Just like with the Michael Company, I'd set up my backstory as a noble's soldier returning home; this time, that had been a mistake. At present, the girl gazed at me like I was a prince on a white horse. Even worse, her parents were all smiles as they watched her.

To them, I was of tolerable stature and seemed to have a steady stream of income, but they'd *better* not be hoping for anything to happen. *Please.*

"She your type?"

As I sucked on a smoldering pipe and pondered what to do, Dietrich came over and jabbed me with her elbow. I knew she was trying to tease, but she'd put way too much force into it.

"What are you talking about?"

"Well, you're all nice and careful around her. Shouldn't you be doing the same for me?"

"Maybe I would if you couldn't lift an axe heavier than me with one hand."

I puffed out a cloud of smoke and waved off my traveling partner's drivel. To be honest, though, I hadn't meant to come off so sarcastically: my statement was fueled by envy. When we'd been helping unload cargo, I'd struggled to lift one box of goods while Dietrich had casually picked up three.

...I know, I know—I should've invested more in Strength. But doing so now wouldn't help me all that much in combat, and my analytical side would throw down the veto before my dumb soul could even make an argument about

looking manly. That didn't mean I couldn't *wish* I were big and buff, though.

"But *anyone* can do that..."

Like hell they can, is what I would've liked to say, but that wouldn't get through to a zentaur. I let her comment go, and she sulked by grinding her front hooves into the dirt. *I wonder what that translates to in mensch terms.*

Troubles aside, I could see a billowing pillar of smoke rising up from the triangle of carriages; once the stewpot at the bottom was filled and then emptied, we'd be off. We were slated to reach a small canton by the end of the day where we could rest our horses, and our destination awaited tomorrow. Mr. Gerulf wouldn't have any need to rush on the way back, meaning he could take his time finding replacement bodyguards. Soon, this awkward atmosphere would end.

Peaceful thoughts swam around in my mind as we hit the road, and time flew by. I'd lost the coin flip today, so I stayed a few dozen paces ahead as the vanguard.

Nothing notable happened in the morning, save for the fact that we forwent a midday break in the hopes of catching the last bits of sunlight when we hit the canton ahead. Yet later in the day, when the canton in question was a straight shot away, an ill omen tickled the tip of my neck.

I was no Margit, but my Presence Detection and Permanent Battlefield perks made me a better scout than most. My instincts told me something was wrong.

This road was a simple stretch of flattened dirt, and unlike the highways, had no borders to mark its edges. Slanting slightly downward from left to right, I felt like something was off on the lower side. The forest here wasn't a well-kept preserve full of mild-mannered logs to be harvested: these were unfettered wilds teeming with only the most vivacious life, impassable to anyone on horseback.

Yet a hundred paces out, there were unnatural holes in the greenery.

The openings weren't large enough to be minor streets branching off the path, and though they could be the work of a local huntsman who needed access to the forest, it didn't make sense that they'd bother making so many in

the same direction. If I had to go hunting, I'd much rather walk an extra twenty paces or so than cut through dense foliage.

Pulling Castor to a halt, I raised my left fist to signal those behind me to do the same. Once the whole convoy stopped, I pulled my steed back around in natural fashion: I "checked an empty waterskin" to give me reason to do so.

"Is something the matter, sir?"

"Quiet, please. All of you stay seated. The road ahead looks strange."

"Strange?"

"I suspect an ambush."

Mr. Gerulf nearly stood up out of fear, but I beckoned him back down. Then I went to lay the situation out to Dietrich, who'd been holding up as the caboose.

There was only one rule to attacking a caravan: leave no survivors. Catching a horse at full speed was a tall order, and the first step in any ambush was to cut off the road. So long as the steeds couldn't get through, neither could the carriages they drew or the scouts who rode them. From there, it became a simple process of pelting the pitiful victims with a deluge of arrows or stones until they were too disoriented to fight off an assault. One or two stragglers might make it away into the woods, but the odds were slim that they'd outmaneuver an overwhelming number of bandits in an unfamiliar forest.

"Raiders?" Dietrich asked.

"I haven't actually noticed anyone yet," I explained, "but the groundwork for an ambush is there. I spotted a few gaps in the greenery that I think they'll use to shoot at us."

"Want me to go check?"

"I appreciate the offer, but with your size, this job is a better fit for a runt like me."

The zentaur pouted for a moment, but her gaze followed my finger toward the woods and she begrudgingly nodded—she knew the loss of mobility in dense thickets was a death sentence for cavalry. Instead, she spoke with her actions: placing her axe on the ground, she pulled out her bow.

“Okay,” I said, “I’ll leave the caravan to you.”

Dietrich’s bow was massive. Hunters used shortbows; soldiers used longbows; but the zentaur specialty was as large as a traditional Japanese yumi. Her ancestors had carved their names into history as a devastating force of “light” cavalry, and the design of her weapon proved that little had changed in the generations since. Eight mensch would struggle to draw the damn thing; if she could wield that, then I was perfectly comfortable leaving the defense to her.

Hopping off Castor and silencing my advance, I sneaked into the forest. I crouched low and tiptoed around every stray branch and dry leaf, going up and down the natural contour of the land. After a short while, the gentle slopes gave way to a man-made mound that was a level higher up. Wooden stakes outlined packed dirt to provide a platform for a handful of men, and I could see a few more identical structures down the line. Their plan must’ve been to hit everything from the front to the back of the convoy at once—and they had log roadblocks ready to cut off a section just about three carriages long.

They’re experienced.

Nine were in plain sight: four on the artificial hill next to me, and five on the next. They likely had more posted on the other side, though, meaning it was best to assume anywhere from twice to thrice as many.

They were only a few hundred paces out, but silently creeping on them took five times longer than usual. If only my childhood partner had been here in my stead, she could’ve sprinted this distance making less noise than I was now.

“Dammit, why the hell aren’t they moving?”

“Refilling a flask shouldn’t take *this* long. You think they caught on?”

“Who cares? No way they can turn on a road this narrow. Let’s just cut the cord blocking the front.”

Oh, crap! Without an escape route, we’d be in for a world of hurt if anything went wrong. Speed was our greatest defensive asset—you can’t hit a target that’s already out of range—and I wasn’t willing to give it up.

Sadly, it appeared I didn’t have the time to come up with a clever plan or quietly take them out one group at a time. I shot to my feet and bolted toward

them.

“Whoa—mrgh?!”

Closing the distance in an instant, I slammed the edge of my shield into the closest man’s face. The chopping motion of my left arm had coincided with him turning around in response to my footsteps: my shield caved in his nose, and the sensation of shattering bone fed back through the strap in my hand.

“You—wah!”

“Where the—gragh?!”

Swiping with the fey karambit in my main hand, I cut up another two. The first lost both his eyes in a deep vertical cut, and I sliced through the other’s armpit using the momentum from the first swing.

The final member of the group was in such shock that his mind couldn’t keep up: he stood dumbfounded without putting up any guard. I kicked him hard right in the manhood to end him.

Four down. Disabled eyes or arms meant I wouldn’t need to worry about these guys rejoining the fight—I could take them out of the equation.

“The hell’s going on?!”

“Wait, over there! I think we’re under attack!”

“Shit! Cut the ropes!”

Alas, my fun little romp was already over. I’d made a ruckus, and even the faraway bandits took notice. A ways off, a man raised his axe to cut through the thick rope holding a stack of logs in place; they were primed to roll down the hill until they crashed into the trees on the other side, totally blocking the road.

“O Great Bodhisattva Hachiman, may my arrow fly true...”

Taking a page out of myth, I muttered a prayer as I readied my crossbow, not knowing if it would be heard. I didn’t really want to ask for the God of Trials’ blessing: if He ended up taking a liking to me, I might literally find myself blessed. The heavens already seemed to have Their eyes on me, and I didn’t want to chance it.

The Shortbow Marksmanship I'd taken as a child wouldn't help here, but aiming was a Dexterous activity—I could make it work with raw stats. This was a much farther shot than my experiences at the Liplar manor, but...

"Raaa—aaagh, ow?!"

I got him! The wind blew the projectile off course from his midsection to his right arm, but it did the job. With a crossbow bolt wedged into his bones, the man unhanded his axe, and it promptly slid down the hill.

This was perfect. The rope holding the logs in place was thick and double-knotted. It'd take much longer to cut with a knife or sword. I'd bought some time.

In the time it took my priceless arrow to find its mark, I'd begun hearing screams out on the road. I glanced back midrun to see that some poor schmuck had eaten one of Dietrich's arrows and gotten himself pinned to a tree.

Oh my gods. About a *third* of the shaft had sunk straight through him. If she could pierce a person's torso like that, one shot could probably tear an arm straight off. That thing wasn't a bow—it was a damn cannon.

More than a hundred paces out, the bandits weren't on a battlefield, but a shooting gallery. Even if they had their own archers, I'd heard that the average trained bowman could only reliably hit within double-digit paces, so any counterattack seemed unlikely.

"Damn brat!"

Coming up against five, I had just unsheathed Schutzwolfe to make things easier when I noticed that the first man running to intercept me looked familiar.

"Fancy meeting you here."

"You little—*argh*!"

He struck from overhead with all his might; I answered with a one-handed overhead of my own. His footing was stable, and his strength flowed into the blade from head to toe to reveal the grit fueling the attack. Yet when we clashed, I redirected his sword to the left to show who had the right of way.

Following my successful parry, the adventurer-turned-outlaw—why was he

here, anyway? Did the GM get lazy?—ended up cutting through air as Schutzwolfe's tip sliced into his forehead and came out his jaw.

I may have taken a small chunk out of his forebrain, but he probably wouldn't die. Of course, I didn't *have* to keep my enemies alive for questioning anymore, so I wasn't all too concerned about his well-being...except he was a bandit.

I wasn't fighting ordinary purse snatchers: these guys were living bounties. Bring them to the local magistrate, and they'd turn into money—alive, they'd turn into *more* money. I didn't care to dig up why these lowlifes had chosen murder as their living, but I was happy to let them enjoy a few extra hours of life if it meant my purse would jingle with a satisfying heft.

Whether their luck ran out when they'd picked a fight with me or when they'd entered Dietrich's line of sight was a tough call, but I'd leave that decision to them. After all, that was basically the only privilege they had left.

What remained of the attacking bandits fell to earth, cleaned up in not two breaths' time.

[Tips] ***Let every penalty atone for one hundred sins.***

—Trialist Empire of Rhine penal code, opening preamble.

Extra thick strands of orb-weaving arachne silk buzzed under the terrific weight of a curving bow, but the sound failed to pull Dietrich out of her memories—that was just how dull this battle was.

At home, her name was Derek. First child to one of the most renowned houses in the Hildebrand tribe, her life thus far had been one of dissatisfaction.

She had been blessed with more general talent than anyone else. She was strong, fast, and so gifted in martial pursuits that she had been called *Mavors's Chosen*, after their god of war. When ranking herself among the warriors around her, it had always been fastest to count down from the top. The bow, in particular, was a favorite of hers: she never once failed to make it to the final rounds in the usual last-man-standing sniping contests. Her legs, the pride of any centaur, were also remarkable: whether near or far, grasslands or rocky

cliffside, she always left crowds of people in her dust.

Yet it was merely faster to count down from the top; she merely made it to the final rounds; she was merely one of the fingers that came up when discussing the best in any field.

That last finger, standing all alone, never referred to her.

She was stronger in battle, better with a polearm, more skilled as a marksman, and faster on her feet than nearly anyone...but she wasn't better than *everyone* at anything.

Of course, she understood. The Hildebrand tribe numbered one hundred eighty-seven; of them, eighty-two were warriors. Only one could be the best at any given thing, and then came second, then third, and so on. Most would never be the greatest at any.

She knew, but she longed for it. The best was the coolest, after all.

That had probably been where her ambitions began.

Look at me. Praise me. Not them; not anyone else; me.

Recognize me.

Dietrich's hand let go of the bowstring, and the arrow launched by her superhuman strength left sound behind as it soared off. An enemy marksman who'd peeked out to return fire lost everything from the neck up. The arrow went straight through his forehead, and the bits connecting his head to the rest of his body gave out, turning the decapitated corpse into a macabre sandbag.

The zentaur's bow was all but a ballista. Each and every arrow fired snuffed out another life. Those who stood their ground dwindled, replaced by those who fled deeper into the trees—either way, the result was the same. Perhaps things would have been different had the forest been too dense to move through, but Dietrich could thread an arrow through the holes in a fortress wall; so long as she could see through the foliage, her marks may as well have been hiding on an empty plain.

So easy, she thought. *So, so easy.*

At this rate, she'd never become the best.

“Wait...” *...Why did I want to be the best, again?*

The uncertainty lasted only a fleeting moment, scattering as another arrow pinned a man’s back to the ground.

To be the best was cool. The tribe’s hero, whom she’d so admired in her youth, had been the coolest of them all. He overcame whatever challenges crossed his path, always surrounded by comrades as he made any and every strategy work out.

Dietrich had looked up to that valor and wanted to replicate it. She had pushed herself beyond her limits and into enemy lines, thinking that glory in battle would bring her closer to the top.

But come to think of it, she didn't know *why* she'd wanted to be the best in the first place. She hadn't ever given it any thought. Most of what she did was fueled by on-the-spot emotions like anger or frustration, or the vague desire not to be looked down on; looking back, there hadn't been much substance there.

Thinking about these kinds of things usually made a nasty feeling bubble up in her chest, so she usually never dwelt on them; if there was a reason she did so now, it was probably because of all the lectures she'd gotten from that little mensch running amok in the forest.

When he started moralizing about the responsibility that came with strength or whatever, it felt different from when her parents or the clan chief used to tell her similar things. There was direction to it—passion, maybe. His words didn't feel like they were just theoretical ideals, but more like a tangible measuring stick that he, too, compared himself against.

Dietrich felt spirit in those words: an alien zeal, or perhaps one she'd left behind long ago...

"Wow! You're *amazing*!"

"Wha—hey! I thought I told you to stay put so you don't get hurt."

Why was I trying so hard, anyway? The bubbling stew of the zentaur's mind stood in contrast with her ice-cold marksmanship as she made her final shot. Scarce few arrows remained in her quiver, but it wouldn't matter if there weren't any more targets to fire at. That last shot had drawn out a cry of awe from the merchant's son, who was *supposed* to be hiding away in the wagon.

If that kid were an enemy, he might've killed me while I wasn't paying attention. Even facing boring opponents, letting herself get so wrapped up in her thoughts that she'd reverted to autopilot was downright embarrassing—she didn't need a scolding from Erich to feel bad about that.

Yet when she turned toward the boy, his eyes were positively gleaming. He

must have grown up totally estranged from violence. Barely of age, the young man didn't have a single scar on his face; though he'd surely been helping at the family business until now, his hands were free of calluses.

What came through in his gaze was something more primal, coded into every organism: fear and respect for the strong. That, and the beaming wonder of a child witnessing a mythical hero.

"Besides, this wasn't all that impressive. It's basically the same as hunting rabbits."

As Dietrich brushed off the embarrassment that came with adoration, she felt like she'd found something that she'd lost many years ago.

As a child, she had cried about never being the best, and her hero had come to wipe away her tears. Kind and respected by all—wasn't *that* the kind of hero she'd wanted to become?

[Tips] What makes a "hero" varies by region, but courage and righteousness are indispensable no matter where one goes.

What a massive pain.

After tying up what remained of the raiders and marching them to the canton, we were unpleasantly surprised to find that they were citizens of said canton. This wasn't exactly an unheard-of turn of events, but I hadn't thought we'd bring them in to their place of residence.

The silver lining was that these hooligans were the nose-pickers of the village: they were already halfway to being pariahs, and we didn't have to worry about the whole town turning on us.

Still, having criminals emerge from their midst was a patently bad look. How bad, you ask? Well, forget the village chief—the *magistrate* in charge could expect to lose his head, and in no figurative manner. Naturally, the canton chief swore to handle the enforcement of justice, groveling on his hands and knees for us to look the other way.

At first, I'd had my fears that the locals would sic their watchmen on us to

cover up the scandal whether we agreed to stay silent or not. However, the presence of a towering zentaur with decapitated heads dangling at her waist—meant to be traded in for a bounty—took care of that. That, paired with the undeniable fact that the two of us had cut down ten times our number of robbers and the sorry state of the living captives, was enough to kill any will to fight.

Although I initially wasn't too keen on what seemed like a deal made at our expense, the reparations offered weren't too shabby. They didn't put out as much as we'd get from the Empire for a live capture, but the sum more than compensated by virtue of cutting out the long wait times the crown imposed to verify a job well done.

Above all else, I could tell from the public reaction that they'd genuinely had no idea these men were living a life of crime. I could accuse them of a lack of oversight and they would have no defense, yet any group of sentient beings was sure to produce a few idiots eventually. Seeing the twelve born here join hands with wayward adventurers and crooks from out of town to make a party forty strong didn't make me angry—it just made me sad about how hard the world was to live in.

There were three hundred people in the whole canton. Hanging a handful of innocents and subjecting the rest to huge fines or hard labor all for the work of five percent was a depressing prospect. On top of that, the remuneration they were offering had been scrounged up from every corner of the canton in a moment of panic; with taxes recently paid and the winter fast approaching, this kind of expenditure would see them giving up next year's spring festival. Even if they stripped these crooks' houses down and sold everything in sight, the deficit would be unsurmountable.

Since the leader of our party was technically Mr. Gerulf, I left the final decision to him; he answered that he'd like to take the most peaceful course of action we could.

Personally, the "peacefulness" of the decision rang hollow against the backdrop of the countless forgotten victims these bandits had tormented over the years...but I couldn't blame the merchant for prioritizing his business. He'd continue to serve this region in the future, and throwing it into chaos would

make it hard to find customers; not to mention how his reputation would tank if he litigated knowing the damage it'd cause to the local people.

But if they wanted a peaceful conclusion, I wanted a one-on-one with the village chief. He would need to promise me two things before I let this go.

First, once the offenders were taken care of, he would have to take the corpses of the adventurers and criminals of unknown origins to the magistrate and ask for an official investigation. That way, when the officials eventually found the bandits' tracks, they'd have a chance to wipe away anything that could incriminate the magistrate and canton, while still finding the remains of the victims to give any grieving families closure.

Second, I handed half the money back. I ordered him to combine it with the reward the magistrate would inevitably give them for "catching" the bandits to build a grave honoring those who had been wronged. We couldn't change the past, and the victims were all well on their way to the gods' laps; yet it would be hard to sleep soundly in the heavens with worldly regret lingering in their souls. This was my way of compromising between serving justice and letting the living continue living their ordinary lives.

I flashed my noble connections—an implicit threat that I could check on things at any time—so I doubted the chief would go back on his word. All that remained was for him to build the grave and make sure his people would forever know it as a warning against those who might follow the same path.

"So is this the right way to do things?" Dietrich asked.

"Right and wrong are conclusions that flip back and forth once things are settled. In the end, the only 'right' way to do things is to find a solution that you yourself can live with." After a second, I added, "For me, that doesn't always mean following the law or doing what everyone accepts as being 'good.'"

To strictly adhere to the code of law, I would have had to skip the village chief and magistrate to knock on the door of whichever noble oversaw this region; there, I would have had to report the incident from beginning to end, hiding nothing about the bandits or their origins.

But who among the living would be any happier for it?

The village chief would be put to death, and the canton he led thrown into disarray; the fines, meanwhile, would probably mean a handful of households would fail to survive the harsh winter. No matter how his business partners reacted on the surface, Mr. Gerulf's contacts would slowly cut ties with what they could only see as a heartless man. Once the magistrate was executed, *other* cantons would be thrown into pandemonium too; the whole region would become unstable. Eventually, the neighboring towns would start searching for the source of this madness and persecute the people here—how would I ever sleep knowing I'd caused all that trouble?

"Sometimes, the 'right' decision you make on the spot can turn out to be a terrible mistake. I'm not some all-knowing genius, and I know it: I think it's better to use the brain I've got to come up with something that fits my personal moral code."

Dietrich's face scrunched up and her tail began to wag. After a moment, she said, "Then I guess I'll think about what I would've done."

I figured that was for the best. On this occasion, Mr. Gerulf had all but passed the ball straight back to me: I had made the real choice almost entirely on my own. Plenty of people would disagree with the way I'd handled things, and I had no mind to say they were wrong. Some would argue that ignorance was no excuse for shirking responsibility; others would say that playing along and asking "What bandits?" was the true path of a good heart.

However, as a potential victim and a working bodyguard, this was my best answer. While I couldn't guarantee that I'd never come to regret it, with what I knew now, this was my way of minimizing the suffering of everyone involved.

Of course, I couldn't deny that this was a tepid solution that had only been possible because Mr. Gerulf and crew were safe and Dietrich and I had gotten away unscathed...but these kinds of decisions only ever came after the events, anyhow. Had the outcome been any different, my choices would have obviously changed too.

Yet with that matter settled, a new issue came to take its place: Mr. Gerulf had taken a liking to us, and recruitment hell had begun again.

Though Dietrich didn't receive a proposal to marry Rudiger on account of

their bodily mismatch, she *did* get asked whether she wanted to be a salaried bodyguard; on the other hand, I *was* given an offer to be taken into the family. More than my physical strength, my witful manners, obvious education, and presumed ability to deal with nobility had apparently caught Mr. Gerulf's eye during the journey. He claimed that my verdict on the bandit case had been the final push he'd needed...but frankly, I had my suspicions that Miss Klara had put in a word.

Her advances had already been quite overt, but when she ended up knocking on my tent the next night—whatever happened to modesty, anyway?—Dietrich and I knew it was time to go.

To begin with, I was trying to get home and set off on an adventure; Dietrich had never planned to live in the Empire forever. Neither of us needed to utter a word to be on the exact same page: as soon as we reached our destination, we were *gone*.

*I can't believe I've had to run away from merchant caravans...*twice*.*

[Tips] GMs may dish out the issues, but it is up to the players to resolve them.

Late Autumn of the Fifteenth Year

Epilogue

After a campaign concludes, the GM may offer a third-party retrospective on how the PCs' actions were viewed by the world at large. Seeing the bird's-eye view of how ridiculous or heroic an adventure was is yet another part of tabletop fun.

"We're out of cash."

After making our way to a big city for the first time in ages, I curtly refused Dietrich's suggestion to splurge on a nice inn.

"Huh? Wait, what'd you say?"

"We're out of money."

"*Why?!*"

Why do you think*?!*

As much as I wanted to shout, I held myself back and calmly opened my backpack to show her the yawning void within that had once been enough food to fuel a one-man mission.

That's right: Dietrich had eaten us into penury.

Fourteen days had passed since we'd parted ways with Mr. Gerulf and his family. The critical failures of fortune that had marked the first leg of my trip home had vanished without a trace, leaving us with peaceful days on the road.

Yet as placid as our travels were, every passing day steadily chipped away at my savings. All the money we were supposed to save on meals by helping load and unload cargo came back with a vengeance, and neither of us could bring ourselves to seek out another merchant, what with all the trouble it could bring. Add the occasional stay at an inn to soothe our souls, and my wallet was draining, fast.

Putting aside the fact that this big eater was just as big a drinker.

Figuring that I could let her enjoy herself every now and then, I'd indulged her request to drink and dine at the last inn to devastating results. Her digestive system wasn't in her upper body, but her huge equine frame; the amount she could ingest was simply on another level compared to a mensch. I had to admit that this was on me for miscalculating: zentaurs had to chew carefully to pass food down the long passage to their stomachs, and I'd foolishly thought that all the chewing would make her fill up faster.

Seeing her go wild in an inn had made me realize that she really had been holding back on the road. I'd let it slide on the basis that she was stocking up for when we resumed travel—apparently, zentaurs could actually do that—but that one meal had set me back *twenty* librae.

From there, the compounding costs of rations and daily life quickly sucked the life out of my once-plump wallet. I knew I'd started with a big cushion of ten drachmae, but at this rate, I'd have burned through half of it by the time I reached Konigstuhl.

Initially, I'd hoped to get home using one gold coin. I'd planned to launch myself onto the frontier with the remaining funds, and it was all I'd have to tide me over until I could find work—I couldn't afford to spend it at random. If I wanted to make my adventuring dreams come true, I'd figured that eight drachmae ought to be my minimum acceptable value.

Once I got home, I wanted to support my family with a big sum up front, since I wouldn't be making as much in the immediate future. From there, Margit and I—though I supposed Dietrich might come along—would need considerable cash to make it to the outer reaches of the Empire.

But after pitying Dietrich for only having one set of clothes and paying for our meals, I'd burned three drachmae. I wasn't even *close* to home yet. And I'd known clothes were expensive, but seeing prices for specialty goods tailored for uncommon body types had nearly made me hurl.

From now on, though, I couldn't afford to waste another penny: I needed the capital to put together a life for myself.

"Aww... No booze?"

“You drank plenty last time. A mensch would’ve burst in a shower of pickled gore if they tried to match you.”

“C’mon, that doesn’t count as *drinking*. I only took two pisses!”

Dietrich was the type to drink, let her liver figure it out, flush, and drink again. But while she was the textbook example of a habitual carouser, I had to acknowledge that there was some truth to her claim that she’d shown some restraint: after all, the spirit of liquor hadn’t once overstayed its welcome. She woke up every morning sober, so I’d give her credit where credit was due.

Still, the cheapest swill still added up when it flowed free—even cruddy, sour beers with bits of grain floating in them.

“A young lady shouldn’t be taking pisses,” I chastised. “You should say you’re picking flowers, or at least that you’re going to the restroom—”

“A piss is a piss, and no fancy words’ll change that. It’s not like I’m gonna start crapping flower petals if I beat around the bush.”

Ugh, what am I going to do with her? I spent a moment trying to think up ways to drill some manners into the little rebel, but eventually decided that she looked the part of a nice lady when she shut up, and that was good enough for now. Etiquette wasn’t something one could learn in a day, and I was around to handle those matters for the time being.

“All the inns in this district look so gloomy,” Dietrich moped.

Our first taste of urban life in quite some time came in the form of a city called Wisenburg. Located in the Lausitz administrative state, it was a metropolis three thousand citizens strong; the Southern Sword mountain range towered in the northwest, with several smaller peaks rich with metals lying just south of it.

The signature silver and iron mines of the city meant that the officially registered citizenry made up only a fraction of the real population. Itinerant miners, rural folks who dropped by to repay their labor taxes, and fugitives forced into labor by the state made up another fifteen thousand semipermanent residents.

Once the precious metals were cast into ingots here, they were shipped

elsewhere to be turned into products or minted into coins. I'd heard that it wasn't feasible to keep the whole supply chain local: mining required enough wood as it was, and the forests of the area couldn't sustain the huge fuel requirements of smithing on top of that. Even so, the booming industry that was present sufficed to draw in huge crowds of workers—naturally, there were plenty of lodgings for every kind of customer.

"They all have a roof and four walls—that's the height of luxury."

"But I want a room built to fit a cen—ugh, *zen*taur."

"I'll try to keep that in mind."

In a sea of options, our shallow purses meant we'd have to choose the cheapest place that looked remotely decent. At worst, I could do something about fleas and lice with magic. I just needed to bring myself back into the chill-inducing mind state required to call Lady Agrippina my sister: the madam had subjected me to some truly awful inns, and if I lowered my standards to be ever so slightly better than that, we wouldn't have any problems finding a place to stay.

Unfortunately, Dietrich's build demanded some extra consideration. Zentaurs were as tall as ogres and unable to sleep in a normal bed. She'd feel cramped if the ceiling was too low, and she'd stick out at every angle if the bed was too small.

Like horses, zentaurs tended only to sleep for anywhere between half an hour and three hours at a time. They could doze off standing up too, but could end up falling over during deep sleep. Instead, they preferred to lay down on thin bedding—similar to a Japanese futon—or to at least have a flat surface around waist height to rest their upper bodies on. While some things could be compromised on, I wasn't too keen on denying her restful sleep everywhere we went.

Alas, the average inn was designed for average people: bipedal, standing upright, and roughly a meter or two in height. When the majority of customers fit this description, it was hard to find an inn that catered to the extra large.

Zentaurs, ogres, and the like also struggled to find good bathhouses. Standard baths came up to their hips at most when sitting down, and steam baths were

usually tight squeezes. I couldn't blame Dietrich for needing a bit more specialization there.

Establishments tailored for the gentry would solve all her problems: they had high ceilings, baths entirely too big for a single person, and furnishings to fit any body type. Better yet, all the amenities could be swapped out for more custom replacements, proving that higher prices truly did buy better service. Not that we could afford that, though—blowing a silver coin every night just for the most bare-bones room was out of the question, especially since we planned to stay in the city for a few days to recuperate.

Ignoring Dietrich's grumbling, I walked along and scoured the signs until I came across one with an emblem of a horn, fang, and scale—the industry's marker for inns that catered to nonstandard folk.

The business didn't have its own bath, the toilets were communal, and hungry patrons would have to make a trip to the local pub; it was basically just a motel, complete with stained bedsheets. Still, there weren't any creepies or crawlies laying claim to the place from midday on, so I could put up with it.

I quietly Cleaned the place up with magic; Dietrich was puzzled as to why such a nice room cost so little, but that was proof that I hadn't been spotted. As long as she hadn't seen me, then I was content to keep doing it: getting bit by bedbugs was awful, and Lady Agrippina would just have to forgive me.

Once we dropped off our luggage, I handed off the Dioscuri to a nearby stable and we walked into the closest diner to grab lunch.

"Man, we really are burning cash." After purchasing a standard meal and drink, I peered into my wallet. Only containing the silver and copper coins for ease of use, my purse was looking much thinner than it once had. Unless I could find a new source of income, we'd need to live meagerly for the foreseeable future. "I guess we either pick up an odd job or find a new caravan..."

"Hey, wait. Look at that."

Knocking back a swig of beer without a care in the world, Dietrich tugged at my sleeve. I looked up to see a wall full of fliers. Among the many that meant nothing to vagabonds like us like barter deals, missing persons requests, or marriage offers, one stood out: positioned front and center was an official

announcement that bore the seal of the local lord.

"A martial arts tournament?"

The notice was adorned with a drawing of two plain swordsmen locked in combat, and advertised a series of trials of arms. These were common throughout the Empire: even at the canton level, we'd had seasonal strongman contests in Konigstuhl, and I'd heard our relatives' town held time trials to see who could cut down a tree fastest or hold up a rock for the longest time. This was the same thing, but scaled up. The noble hosting it would probably justify it as a means of scouting out capable soldiers, but in truth, this was a way of tossing the people a bone.

We were in a mining town, after all. A "harvest" festival in the fall probably didn't mean much to the populace, and the Harvest Goddess likely didn't even have a temple here. In Her place would be the God of Metals and maybe His brother, the God of Trials; a martial tournament was perfect to let the people blow off steam.

Besides, while this would still be a contest of battlefield skills, it wasn't going to be as bloody as what one might see in the Colosseum of classical Rome or the castles of old Suruga. More idyllic than those, the competition ranged across many different categories: jousting, group combat, javelin throwing, long-distance archery, horseback archery, and so on, and so on; none saw its entrants fight to the death.

The Emperor of Creation had banned the killing of people for sport, and the organizers would obviously not want to let their most prized fighters die for the sake of entertainment. From where I stood, it seemed like the execution of criminals had devolved to fill that niche, but I guessed that *technically* didn't count.

The main event was jousting: jockeys clad in dazzling armor rode up on their horses to earn glory in battle—but with blunted swords and training lances. So long as they didn't tumble off their steeds in a particularly unfortunate way, there wasn't any risk of death. Second most popular were the one-on-one duels, also held with mock weapons; you'd need a particularly worked-up contestant to cross the line with those. Of course, thrashing one another with

metal rods still wasn't *safe*, and an unlucky exchange could still put someone in bed for months.

"Whoa," I gasped. "First place in each category is five drachmae!"

That was a huge payout. The singles jousting tournament—group battles had been more popular in medieval Europe, but individual valor was easier to see one-on-one and was thus more popular in the Empire—and singles duels I'd mentioned made for two. On top of that were both the distance javelin toss and one geared toward accuracy; archery similarly had separate categories for multitarget, long-distance, and horseback. Add unarmed combat and a few others to the mix, and there were more than ten total categories: that was over fifty drachmae, just in prize money.

By my estimate, the local lord was a big fan of martial sports. Factoring in the venue fees and miscellaneous costs, the tournament would have to cost hundreds of gold coins to put on. Sure, that wasn't a huge dent in an aristocrat's treasury, but it was a lot to pay for the trouble of having to ask one's superior for permission to do extra work.

"This is perfect," I said. "We should just barely make the registration deadline, and the whole thing should only stop us for ten days or so. I think it's worth signing up."

"Me too. I wanna buy my own bedding already, and I can't let my tutelary spirit share a spot with my luggage forever. I want another mule or two." Dietrich lowered her voice and mumbled into her mug, but I could still clearly hear her from a mere table's length away. "And I feel kinda bad making you pay for everything."

This was a good opportunity for her. The only money she'd earned thus far was her share of cleaning up the bandits; yet she'd had to spend that pretty quickly just to scrape by.

I pretended not to have heard her last comment—she'd just get embarrassed and deny it if I pointed it out—and instead asked about something that piqued my curiosity.

"What's a tutelary spirit?"

“Well, a zentaur’s back is a holy place. We all get our own god watching over us, made up of the souls of our ancestors. That’s why we never let people ride on our backs, and we *try* not to carry stuff like that either.” She eyed me for a second and added, “Did you not know that? I’m pretty sure the zentaurs around here have the same tradition.”

“Now that you mention it, I don’t think I’ve ever seen a zentaur let anyone ride them.”

Looking back, I’d seen zentaurs using mensch-catered backpacks that went over their shoulders, but never a saddlelike knapsack. Although I could think of exceptions in heroic epics where brave zentaur knights carried their lords through enemy lines or whatnot, none in real life had broken the rule for mundane work—not even in the melting pot of Berylin. It was only now that I could understand just how heroic the zentaur heroes of sagas had been.

“See? Walking around with my dumb armor chest isn’t just lame, it’s an offense to my ancestors—so I really want the money. How about you? What are you entering? The jousting one?”

“No, if I remember right, I think you have to put up your armor and horse as collateral to enter a jousting competition. I don’t have any fancy plate armor, and I’m not even that confident with a lance. I think I’ll just stick to the one-on-one duels.”

“Huh, okay. I think I’ll go with archery. It says you can enter multiple categories, so I’ll probably go and do all three.”

“Uh... Are zentaurs allowed to compete in horseback archery?”

That has to be cheating, right? Swallowing back my thoughts, I downed the tasteless soup in my bowl so we could hurry up and go register at the main gate. If we could just win one of the categories, it’d cover the food costs for this bottomless hole I called a companion. Plus, I was sure Dietrich wanted to buy herself replacements for all the stuff her previous crew had stolen; it was time to get a little bit serious.

“Confident?” I asked.

“*Duh*, I’m confident. Not like there’s gonna be anyone strong at a backwater

tournament like this. You better not lose to some country hick from bumfuck nowhere, you hear?”

“Bum...ugh. I don’t plan on losing, but personally, I’d be happier if the competition is strong. It’ll give me a chance to hone my skills, and a good fight is way more enjoyable than a one-sided beatdown.”

“...You know, I’ve been thinking this for a while, but you sure would fit in with a zentaur tribe.”

“Why’s that?”

My genuine question was met with a weary expression that screamed, *You just don’t get it.*

Wait, hold on—did she think I was some kind of battle-crazed maniac? I know we’d been sparring pretty much every night, and I admittedly did want to see how my skills fared against the wider world, but that didn’t mean that was my top priority or anything.

As we walked to the reception, I tried to explain away Dietrich’s misunderstanding; yet the whole way there, she simply shrugged me off.

[Tips] Martial tournaments in the Empire are recreational events that, legally speaking, are similar to private military parades. More than just the hobbyhorse of militaristic nobles, the occasions serve as a proving grounds for wandering fighters seeking employment, and many warriors will cross national borders aiming to partake.

Signing up for the one-on-one duels went by without incident. The clerk I spoke to didn’t put up any protest, and nobody turned up to make a hackneyed remark about how letting a snot-nosed punk like me in the ring was assisted suicide with extra steps.

Not that I’d *wanted* that, of course, but I’d been a bit worried—what with my appearance and all. However, according to the clerk, plenty of farm boys fresh from their coming-of-age ceremonies gathered around to show off their strength and put their names out there. Anyone was allowed to enter so long as

they paid the fee, and two copper quarters were all it took to book a place in the competition.

The same could not be said for Dietrich.

It seemed that this was the first time a zentaur had ever expressed interest in this tournament series's horseback archery category, and the clerk had the same reaction as me, ultimately prompting them to call their boss: "Horseback archery? Horse? Back? Uh...is that allowed?"

Figures. I mean, she's not on a horse's back. She's just part horse. That has to be cheating.

After getting the manager, the manager then sent a message to the lord hosting the tournament, who allegedly responded with an energetic, "Sure, that sounds fun!" Despite the noble's decision, though, the desk worker handling our reception still seemed unconvinced. *Don't worry, I'm right there with you.*

Yet the confusion during the sign-up process was nothing compared to the state of chaos that followed.

You see, on this occasion, the local lord had opened an official gambling circuit on the outcomes of the event. Probably hoping to undercut the profits of criminal organizations and the inevitable underground bets they'd host anyway, they'd set up a counter next to the one for tournament entry so the employees could shift around the odds whenever a strong-looking challenger showed up.

The actual betting wasn't open until after the registration period closed, but a handful of loafers were hanging around like this was the paddock of a racecourse—fitting, considering my company—in order to scout for potential winners. When they caught wind that a zentaur was entering in horseback archery, the crowd went wild.

As far back in time as the Age of Gods was, tales of the Living Scourge survived to the present day. On top of that, memories of the dromedrin—think zentaurs, but with camel bits down below—giving the imperial army serious trouble were fresh in the Rhinian zeitgeist. Anyone who was anyone knew that four-legged demihumans made for killer archers.

The number-keepers went back and forth over fears that odds so stacked

would kill business and the reality that Dietrich would almost certainly win. I quickly lost count of how many times they shifted the payouts.

Figuring it would only do harm to stick around, I pulled Dietrich away, but the clamor around the gate was audible even when nearly out of view; I had no doubt their arguments went on for quite a while longer.

And when I went to check in the next day, surprise, surprise: the betting numbers for horseback archery were pretty much nothing at 1.05 odds. What this meant was that someone could bet a whole libra and only earn five assarii for being right. In the end, it looked like the bookies' fear of the zentaur's skill had won out. Even then, Dietrich was all but promised to win—I didn't know how they were handling the profit skimming, but I felt bad for the people running this bet.

But, hey, you never know until you know. I didn't want to be party to the golden ship of a 120,000,000 dollar confetti storm, so I'd do well to make sure she held off on any drinks the night before.

On a separate note, however, I was met with the exact wonderful news I'd been hoping for.

The singles duels didn't actually begin with one-on-one fights: because of the number of participants, we were split into ten free-for-all pools, with the winner of each moving on to fight in the knockout rounds. To accommodate the format, betting was only open for this first round, and only the top fifty or so contestants had any sort of notoriety to work off. The rest were thrown into the same dark-horse category with *fivefold* returns.

Naturally, it didn't make logistical sense to vet every single entrant and statistically calculate the odds of winning like the horse-racing associations of Earth. This wasn't some underground fighting circuit where every warrior gave a whole speech every time they entered the ring; I thought it was a fair compromise.

Now, the betting houses of my past life had barred competing parties from participating—probably a means of combating match-fixing and promoting fairness. Yet there were no such rules here. In fact, a fighter was free to bet on *themselves*.

As vexing as it was to admit, this face I'd gotten from my mother and the leanness of my build meant no one was looking my way: I was a dark horse. But if I won with the odds stacked against me...

My lips stretched into an evil grin as I decided to earn myself a bit of sneaky pocket change.

[Tips] Imperial law allows local governments to run gambling facilities.

The tournament venue wasn't much of a venue at all.

Fantasy settings full of swords and magic were prone to having massive amphitheaters with row after row of seats specifically to house these sorts of competitions. Alas, the capital to an administrative state was lucky to have anything comparable, let alone lesser cities. The Emperor of Creation wasn't big on bread and circuses, and thus his Empire was sparsely populated by large-scale entertainment facilities.

In our case, the event was being held just outside the city walls. A stretch of land had been flattened out with a few bleachers for high-ranking spectators, with everyone else laying out picnic sheets to surround the empty plain we were to fight in. The arenas themselves had been weeded and trampled, with white chalk marking the boundaries. Had I not known any better, my first guess would've been that this was the grounds for a sports festival.

Simple as it was for a citywide event for ten thousand, it wasn't like imperial citizens had the zeal needed to justify regular gladiatorial facilities like those of ancient Rome. Honestly, I was impressed they'd put together seating for the upper class.

The tournament was set to take place over five days, with the preliminary rounds taking place on the first and second. Days three and four were meant to thin out those who'd made it into the knockout rounds, and the last day was dedicated to the grand finale: the emblematic jousting finals.

My debut was on the afternoon of the second day. After the boxing—though pretty much anything went other than grappling—and wrestling events, the armed singles duels began.

Each of the ten preliminary pools comprised twenty to twenty-five fighters structured into a battle royale. The last man standing from each would move on to the tournament bracket on day four.

I'd been seeded into the fifth group. No one paid me much mind, and the bell beginning our match rang without anyone bothering to target me.

One point of interest was how open this melee was—that is, since everyone was free to target whomever they wished, the majority ended up dogpiling opponents they'd never beat in a fair fight. The favorite of our group was a wandering cynocephalus knight who'd built up an impressive name by putting out his fair share of trouble in the region. Unfortunately for the hyenid gnoll, he was currently struggling to fend off the dozen or so people ganging up on him.

While everyone was free to pick whatever fights they chose, gear was far more restrictive. The organizers knew there wouldn't be any spectacle if someone mowed down the competition with enchanted weapons, and as a result, we were all bound to rent out mock equipment. Not only were our weapons blunted, but our defensive equipment was limited to worn-out junk the host's soldiers were on the verge of throwing out. This meant contestants couldn't brainlessly rely on bought power to brute-force victories, but it was clearly a detriment to the gnoll, who seemed more used to heavier armor.

Part of any warrior's strength lay in their equipment, and that was especially true of a wanderer. We were the kinds of people to pour fortunes of a lifetime into weapons, armor, and miscellaneous trinkets without reserve. Yet after spending enough to build a small house on gear, we found ourselves staying in rotting inns and drinking cheap beers. Take those precious knicknacks away, and nobody in this line of work could show their true strength.

Of course, the policy was still good: had he shown up in glorious plate armor, our blunted sticks and axes wrapped in cloth would do nothing at all. I wasn't denouncing the rule itself, but simply lamenting the fact that the knight wouldn't be able to show his skill to the fullest.

Armor wasn't some magic clothing that instantly made one stronger, and required genuine technique to make use of: not only did the wearer have to learn how to move fluidly in it, but with enough savviness, they could deflect

attacks in ways that left the enemy open. I suspected the cynocephalus was as handicapped now as if he'd been forced to fight with his off-hand tied behind his back.

Meanwhile, I was living the good life. Half of the crowd had gone off to gang up on the gnoll, and I kept a low profile on the periphery. Whaling on one of the many in the thick of things from behind was an easier sell than facing me in an actual duel, and my rivals slowly whittled away at their own numbers. Using my lack of reputation to my advantage, I saved my energy and waited until I absolutely had to before knocking out my first opponent. Even then, I made sure not to draw any attention with a flashy finish: a tired man came swinging with a lazy approach, and I "barely" managed to react and counter.

This wasn't me trying to use my wiles to skirt by without fatigue or injury—frankly, I could wipe the floor with a crowd of this level empty-handed. No, I just had bigger fish to fry than flaunting my strength here.

By the time I finished monotonously cleaning up the stragglers, the hyenid knight had also finished dealing with his mob. But from what I could tell, he seemed utterly drained.

I couldn't blame him. This wasn't a kendo match where one strike defined the round; he'd had to knock all of his opponents out, and had taken plenty of hits himself in the process. He'd managed to take most of the rabble out with one hit apiece, but not in time to avoid the cloud of swords and spears hurled his way. Dull as they were, the blunt masses had landed in a few thinly protected spots, and he was covered with bruises.

Perhaps more tiring, though, was how a handful of his opponents had run around in circles trying to wait for an opening. I surmised that chasing them down had been a major hit to his stamina.

I might've actually had some fun if I'd fought him at full power, but sadly, I had a journey to fund. He struck, several times more slowly than when he'd been at full strength; I slipped through and smacked him hard on the wrist to end the brawl.

"Argh..."

While I hadn't broken his arm, I'd hit him hard enough to potentially leave a

small fracture. Letting go of his large sword, he took a knee in pain; I pointed my sword right in his face as he dropped.

I smiled as he looked up in disbelief and asked him if he wanted to continue. Though there was a separate category for boxing, there wasn't any rule barring unarmed combat. If he wanted to pick up his weapon and try again, that was well within his right.

However, the man raised his hands and surrendered in good grace. He knew that pushing the envelope when my weapon was right in his kisser was likely to end with a real injury.

"Wh-What an upset! Our winner is, um—let's see... Uh, blond hair, mensch, short..."

An announcer with a mystic speakerphone provided live commentary for those in the back of the crowd, and he was in a proper panic. From every other direction came shrieks and boos, probably from the knight's fans or those who'd punched him in as a winning ticket.

But I didn't care so long as I won. I flicked away my sword and bowed to my opponent. Then, I bowed to the onlookers in every direction and left the scene.

I couldn't care less that I'd orchestrated a boring opening fight: I was *quintupling* my money. Mwa ha ha, getting five drachmae for this was easy pickings. The opportunity didn't come up often, and I ran the risk of running into a ridiculously broken enemy, but *man*, was this a good business.

Heh, not only could I make back what I'd lost on travel, but I'd be able to make a donation to the Konigstuhl canton at this rate. I wouldn't want the money I sent to my family to make father and Heinz stick out in a bad way; if I built the village a new granary or covered the cost of fixing up the town square, I was sure they'd enjoy a better reputation in the community. Oh, or maybe I could buy old Holter a mate.

"Man, you sure do love your schemes."

"Aw, come on. You're not going to accuse me of playing dirty, are you?"

Dietrich was waiting for me back in the tent that served as the competitors' waiting room. She didn't seem like she'd been worried; rather, she was as much

a spectator as the best of them. Munching on fish and sipping on booze—which she must've bought at a huge markup from the vendors wading through the crowds—she was the spitting image of a hopeless addict at the racetrack.

"I mean, I know it's not like you threw the match, but...c'mon, those guys were chumps."

"That last knight wasn't a chump—he was a great hero with poems in his name. The announcer talked him up before things started, remember?"

"Yeah, but that's not what I meant. It's just...couldn't you have gone in all fancy like when you beat me? It was so *boring*."

"I wonder if you can say that again after seeing *this*."

I flicked a coin Dietrich's way. It zipped toward her face at tremendous speed, and she effortlessly plucked it out of the air; yet when she realized the twinkle in her palm was *golden*, her eyes went wide.

"I bet a drachma on myself and got four more in return. Heh, still want to laugh at my tactics? The odds of my next fight will probably be even better now."

"Brilliant! Genius! You're the smartest man in the Empire!"

"Ha ha ha! Don't think I didn't hear you grumbling about not getting to drink while everyone else is partying. Go on, have some fun!"

"Yippee!"

Dietrich galloped off to the bleachers, where the vendors tended to gather. The tournament was a festival, and it felt wrong not to give her an allowance to enjoy herself. A drachma was a lot, but I'd gotten it for free anyway.

If I won the next round, I was ready to splurge—probably on more presents for my family. Some nice cloth would be a good choice for Michael and Hans, so they'd be able to wear newly sewn garments when they got married; on the off chance we came across a steelworking city on the way home, I bet everyone would appreciate a sturdy hoe or scythe head. Oh, and how could I forget about my nephew? It'd been a while since he was born, but I wanted to get him a set of silver spoons for good luck.

Caught up in daydreams of free profits and the purchases it would fund as I was, I didn't want anyone to start trouble with me over a dumb grudge. I packed up my belongings and quickly made for the inn.

[Tips] Even the most rural of tournaments is not to be scoffed at. Whether to find funds for their journey or on a sheer whim, true champions can and will stop by to hide among the competition.

The fourth day arrived in the blink of an eye, mainly because Dietrich's end had gone so swimmingly that there was little to mention.

The preliminaries on the second day consisted of traditional trials like shooting targets from fifty paces out, shooting distance to see who could clear a hundred paces, and hitting five out of ten marks while running. She absolutely crushed every one.

Holding back was a foreign concept to Dietrich, and her actions caused her already low odds to plummet so hard that the bookies had to close shop for lack of opposing bets. If I had to guess, zentaurs would not be allowed back in for horseback archery next year.

As expected, the knockout rounds were more of the same: she won with such magnificent perfection that it was boring to watch. I'd expected nothing less of someone who'd charged into enemy lines, hunted down an enemy general, and picked a fight with the hero of her clan, all while living to tell the tale.

For standard target-shooting, a handful of skilled marksmen kept up with her until the end, but when she decided the whole thing was a chore, she fired three arrows at once from 150 paces out and landed all of them. Their spirits broken, they all surrendered.

The sniping rounds were even *less* entertaining on account of her powerful bow and specialized skill. Out of the fifty entrants, only two had managed to keep up with her in any way: an audhumbla and a callistian. They had both the strength and the bows to match her, but eventually came up short when it came to the luck of the wind and their technical ability to compensate for it.

As for the equestrian competition... Did I really need to elaborate? The

decisive round centered around shooting at ten successive targets on horseback, where the winner was whoever hit the most targets. If multiple people went ten for ten, then they'd keep going until there was a clear winner. Forget not holding back: Dietrich went out of her way to mow down targets at twice the range of everyone else. Who could blame them for losing heart?

And so, Dietrich suddenly found herself fifteen drachmae richer. Yet as with any nouveau riche, she had immediately gone off to gleefully spend it. When she came back, she'd shelled out the asking price for a ludicrously expensive wine that came "from a good batch" near the Southern Sea; she'd picked up a mead that smelled like the Wine God died and fermented in the bottle, accompanied by a phony anecdote as to why it was good; and she'd been lulled by some salesman's smooth talk about how even noblewomen lined up for his silver hair ornaments, and bought one for when her hair grew out.

The sorts who let a bit of spending money get to their heads were everywhere—I'd known a few in the past. I vividly recalled a grade-school friend buying every glowing bracelet and vinyl balloon at a festival, only to come up short when the rest of us were eating yakisoba and sipping on sodas.

She must have forgotten that this money was also how she was meant to pay for replacement gear. I watched her coldly, but didn't say anything; it was in her best interest to learn the hard way at least once. Besides, I was already in line for my first knockout match.

Unlike the first day, the main tournament ran all day until the winner was crowned. With ten people, the top six—as judged on their initial performance by in-house panelists—got a first-round bye. Obviously, my inconspicuous showing placed me well outside the top seeds, and I would need to win one more round than most of the others if I wanted to take the whole event.

If I came in first place, the returns on any money gambled were almost *thirtyfold*. Even after breaking through the preliminaries, I was still a dark horse, with per-match odds remaining at a cool five-point-oh.

My utterly trite means of victory had led the crowd to see me as a lucky kid who'd reaped the benefit of others' work. Being a fellow low-seed competitor, my opponent hadn't had the greatest showing during the preliminaries either;

but he was still the watch captain for a nearby canton, and the onlookers considered him a sure win as a result.

Now, whatever might happen if I put all my previous winnings into another bet here?

Just kidding: I would never. This line of work was one ever at the mercy of fate's dice, and there was no telling when an ancient dragon would come to ravage the very city we were staying in. I was prepared to face an epic hero hiding his true identity, a masterful warrior here just to kill time, or whoever else.

Though I hadn't noticed anything unusual about the man while we ten finalists were being introduced, it was hard to gauge someone when their weapon was sheathed. Some people, like Sir Lambert, passively radiated intimidating auras, but tons of real threats saved their deathly presence for when a battle was at hand.

More than anything, I was simply not well versed in measuring another's strength without crossing blades with them. Pouring my life's savings into this bet was too much of a gamble. I mean, yes, I was literally gambling, but there was an ironclad rule about this sort of thing: only put in as much as you can laugh off. This time, it wasn't like I had to risk everything I had in order to save Elisa's life or anything; wanting to hedge against the worst-case scenario, I repeated my first-round bet with a single gold coin.

Even this low stakes investment would net me huge returns if I won—so much so that the government might ask me to stop. Well, whatever, I'd cross that bridge if I got there.

My mind meandered as I waited for my turn, and the unanticipated second round of the top ten quickly rolled around. The other nine had all been winning bets in their own rights, and the fight with a no-name was sure to deflect eyeballs.

"Will the fighters for the second round please enter the ring!"

Oh, that's me. A mystically amplified voice directed me into a chalk square roughly ten meters on each side. Having one of only two fighters run away wouldn't be very fun to watch, and they'd shrunk the grounds from the

preliminaries accordingly.

“On the west wing, we have the shining star of his countryside town! Captain of the Watch and a veteran fighter, welcome Vetoslav of Dreieich! And on the east wing, we have the young lad of fortune, Erwin of Walteeesch!”

The crowd remained mild-tempered. Who could blame them, when one of the contestants was a scrawny boy who’d advanced through sheer luck?

As an aside, I’d entered under a fake name. Although Limelit converted fame into experience for me, I felt like gaining a reputation for plowing through a regional tournament before I’d even registered as an adventurer was kind of backwards. That, and I also didn’t want anyone tracking me down for the money I’d make here.

Between the prizes and my bets, I’d have enough to justify whatever effort it took to chase me across state borders if I won. You might think that no one would be stupid enough to hunt down the champion of a martial tournament, but the well of dumbass moves was not to be plumbed so lightly. Plenty of idiots were happy to rely on alternative means like poison or seduction anyway.

On the other hand, having a bit of cash wouldn’t be anything to worry about if I were a local adventurer known in the area. As a community figure, people would let me know if they saw anything suspicious and make it harder for nefarious individuals to do me harm.

“This isn’t really what I had in mind.”

My opponent’s voice rang loud and clear, also amplified. We had tiny mystic microphones strapped to our chests to excite the crowd with our preduel trash talk. The audio was fed back to the arcane system by the announcers, and then rang out through the speakers littering the venue. As far as I knew, this was military-grade technology—how in the world had they gotten permission to use it for a random competition?

“Make sure to throw in the towel if it gets too tough, kid. I’m not a fan of hurting children.”

The giant grizzly callistian looked down on me more literally than metaphorically: his “trash talk” was closer to genuine concern. Holding a huge

training axe, his intimidating presence was more than enough to convince me he was fit for the job of watch captain.

“There isn’t any need to worry,” I said. “Here, in the ring, I would rather you afford me the courtesy you might do me as a swordsman.”

Yet I wasn’t cowardly enough to balk at his aura, and my experience in battle was nothing to sneeze at. I gently unsheathed my sword and placed the broad side against my forehead in a warrior’s salutation.

“Very well... Don’t die on me, kid.”

“Please, feel free—without reserve.”

I pointed my blade toward him in invitation, and the callistian began to advance with his axe in front of him. He did not run: he simply marched without any opening, his hands firmly planted near the base and middle of the axe’s grip. Every step made me feel like a foot soldier awaiting the approach of an oncoming tank.

I suspected that large folk like him had racial bonus traits to intimidate those with smaller frames. Envious as I was that he had something I could never get, I sharpened my mind and focused on the incoming attack.

First came the axe—or so he feinted, but his true aim was a punch with his massive fist. Just a few steps outside striking range, his leisurely gait gave way to a full on sprint. Tempo mix-ups were the most basic of all deception, but his came with masterful fluidity. I could feel the effort that had gone into polishing his craft.

On top of that, he was holding back. Thinking that an axe wrapped in cloth could still kill me with a solid hit, he tried instead to pin me down with the paw of his hand. If he struck me away, he’d be able to ease up on impact; if he got the pin, he’d be instantly declared the victor.

Smiling at the gentleman’s kindness, I slipped to the left and landed a counter right in his midsection.

“Grgh?!”

I’d totally caught him off guard. I bet I’d vanished before his eyes: squatting

low, I'd slipped past him in the blink of an eye.

That said, he was a sturdy fellow. As confident as I was that I could slice through to his innards with a real blade, my training sword bounced off his thick coat even with a clean hit. It was no wonder the callistians, as an entire species of permanently reared-up bears, were always in the running in discussions of the strongest kith.

Turning back to face my opponent, I twirled my sword to shake off the numbness in my hand; he'd managed to stop himself just at the edge of the ring and was holding his side.

Murmurs washed over the crowd. Our exchange had only lasted a moment, and the greater part of my strike had been hidden behind his massive frame. For most laymen, it would have seemed like a mysterious chain of events: I'd disappeared, and the callistian had suddenly taken a knee.

"How did I do?" I asked.

"My apologies," he said, dropping his head and hand both. "I underestimated you on account of your youth. I'm fine enough thanks to the blunted blade, but I would have died in a real duel. Honor rules that I should concede, but..."

"May I offer you one more bout? Remember what I said at the start: without reserve."

"My thanks!"

Evidently enough, the man was an earnest fighter. His apology felt sincere, so I went ahead and accepted it; immediately, he offered a word of gratitude my way and a giant swing of his axe. Sprinting forward like he'd done before, he held the back of the axe's grip with just his left hand to extend his reach as far as possible. I liked it: extending his range while moving was a great combo.

An atrocious snarl rang out as I took a large step back and the swing zoomed by my eyes. I hadn't borrowed a shield—they only had second-rate articles for rental—but blocking had never been part of the plan. I was playing a fencer build: get hit once, and I was out.

But the callistian wasn't done after one attack. Using the rest of his angular momentum, he swung himself around to kick with a leg far longer than any

bear's; right after that, his spare hand swiped at me to control more space. Although his style relied on the natural strength the heavens had gifted him with, it was no brainless brute force; he logically exploited his talents to the greatest extent he could.

Yikes, that's scary. Those meathooks of his looked like pure power—though in truth callistians could accomplish finer tasks like writing—and had razored claws to match. While his punches weren't quite enough to tear straight through armor, I had no doubt they'd put a fat dent into any platemail.

What this meant was that if he hit me, I'd die. I knew I'd said "without reserve," but why was he *here* when he would definitely have been a favorite in the boxing matches? Unless, maybe, some callistian in years prior had blown out the competition so hard that they were now banned from the sport, like Dietrich was sure to do with zentaurs this year.

Axe after claw after kick zipped by without leaving any openings. As I continued to dodge, I could hear the audience beginning to clamor. Echoing in a dilated timescape, their voices crashed into my ears like roaring waves; in place of specific meaning was the primal excitement at good old-fashioned bloodsport.

Hah, where'd all that apathy from the start of the round go? I'd already figured sandbagging to raise my betting returns wouldn't be viable in the knockouts, so maybe now they'd stop looking down on me so much.

Through careful observation, I carved out an opportunity in the barrage without openings and jumped into the eye of the storm. His swings were wide and large, meaning he couldn't keep it up forever without taking in a big breath. The slight break in form was my cue to close the gap and hit him where it hurt: under his jaw. Unprotected by bone and relatively lightly covered by muscle and fur, all it took was placing the tip of my sword below his chin to get him to throw on the emergency brakes.

Both arms raised, the man looked like he was ready to deliver the finishing blow from the outside; yet his eyes were wide open with shock. I wasn't an expert at reading demihuman expressions, but the surprise was palpable.

"Gh..."

“By my estimate, I could have thrust through your skull and into your brain. Though, I suppose I would have had to unhand my weapon a bit early if you leaned forward to crush me with your fall.”

My Lightning Reflexes fizzled away, and the world resumed its natural flow. The end of my heightened alertness spelled the end of the fight.

The venue had fallen silent, as though a heavy rain had doused their burning excitement. No one made a sound—they were too dumbfounded. In a tempest of violence thought unweatherable by all, I had suddenly appeared; as the storm receded, it left only me as the victor.

Thinking it was bad manners to keep my sword nestled into my opponent’s neck forever, I quietly withdrew my blade. I wasn’t one to let my guard down thinking I’d won, but it was apparent that a man tasteful enough to offer a kid like me an apology wouldn’t go back on an honorable duel.

“It’s your victory.” The callistian dropped his axe and took a knee.

Finally, the crowd’s collective consciousness caught up to the situation: they went wild. The hoots and hollers were so profoundly noisy that it sounded like a bomb had gone off in the stands.

Among the many cheers at the upset victory were the sorrowful wails of those who’d bet on the callistian. On the other hand, some had figured that what happens once might happen again, and were now losing their minds over the profit they’d made off me.

“It was a good fight,” I said.

“Heh, please. I couldn’t even imagine myself landing a hit. That felt like trying to box my shadow on a moonlit night.”

The man walked over and stretched out a balled fist. Imperial tradition was to link weapon-wielding hands in a show of trust, and this was how clawed races kept themselves from hurting their fleshier friends.

Happy to oblige, I energetically bumped my fist against his.

“Win the next one for me,” he said. “I’d like to at least go home with the honor of losing only to the eventual champion.”

“That’s the plan, of course. Feel free to place a bet on me if it strikes your fancy.”

“Hah! Not a bad idea.”

Seen off by a majestic howl of a laugh, I exited the scene of my first knockout duel with a skip in my step.

[Tips] Callistians are demihumans who originate from the northern reaches of the Central Continent. Many are intimidated by their appearance, as they are effectively bipedal bears, but culturally, they are a highly social people with great fondness for others and a long history of poetry. When enraged, a group of them can bring down drakes unarmed—and have. They are no doubt one of the strongest among all the sentient races.

The grand finale rapidly approached.

I could almost hear a distant yell demanding that I stop skipping things, but I was probably imagining it. At any rate, my second and third fights had been far less interesting than the first. I’d gone up against a mensch soldier and a werewolf mercenary, respectively: I’d disarmed the former over and over again, only inelegantly ending the fight after realizing that he wouldn’t give up; the werewolf had suffered a rib injury in his last round, trivializing the affair.

To add to my woes, I’d been too flashy in my duel with the callistian—not to mention the man was a well-known local—which had sent my earning potential tumbling through the floor. An upset victory was no longer upsetting by the fourth time it occurred, and I figured that the odds might even be *against* me by the final round; yet, surprisingly enough, I found that the other finalist was slated to win with about two-to-one odds.

From what I’d heard, my opponent was a mensch knight who’d managed to end every single battle in one hit thus far. Rumor had it he was young—only barely of age—but I didn’t snoop any further: I didn’t want to diminish the beauty of discovering a worthy foe in battle. Excited at the prospect of a good fight, I was fidgeting in the waiting room when I sensed a visitor at the tent door. Dietrich had just gone out to buy more booze, but this was clearly not her.

“Excuse me, Mr. Erwin of Waltesch. May I have a moment of your time?”

“...You’ll have to pardon me. Have we met?”

A mensch man came inside and greeted me by my false name. Although he was dressed as a commoner, the impression of a classy education came through in spades: his footwork, mannerisms, and the cast of his gaze were thoroughly refined. I could tell he was dressing below his post at a glance.

Yet he lacked the gait of a fighter. He was less prudent with his balance than a true warrior, and I had him pegged as a bodyguard at best. Coming from a more sedentary background, I suspected his training had come from waiting on a high-class person. While he was still young, he seemed relatively close to thirty; I imagined he was in a position of authority, at least as far as servitude went.

“I have come on the order of my superior. Would you be willing to hear out a request?”

“A request, you say?”

“Yes, mister. If you wouldn’t mind having a look here...”

Suddenly, the man produced a small leather pouch. Plain and simple, the bag was small enough to fit in one hand. Yet the contour of the contents made it easy to guess that it was full of cash.

Ahh... I see your game.

“I am not so careless as to accept payment without knowing what the job entails,” I said. “May I ask you for a more detailed explanation?”

“Why, it is a simple task. All I ask of you is to be defeated in the next round.”

The year I’d spent under Lady Agrippina served me well here, as without it, I would have certainly furrowed my brow. A version of myself less accustomed to insulting propositions wouldn’t have just made a face: he would’ve punched the fool in the kisser.

So this is how he ends every fight in a single blow.

And here I’d been worried that my usual luck had kicked in to bring an avatar of the God of Trials to face me in battle or something. Reality was much less exciting than I’d imagined.

“Fixing a match in a tournament meant to honor the art of combat seems rather boorish, wouldn’t you say?”

“Please, don’t be so rigid. The victory itself would only amount to five drachmae, anyway—I would advise against thinking so deeply on the matter.”

Then what does that say about the guy trying to buy his way into winning this paltry duel? As much as I wanted to snap back, my reason managed to rein in my mouth before I could.

Truth be told, winning a regularly held contest like this was sure to bring its fair share of glory. My opponent was supposedly a “wandering knight,” but judging from his evidently well-off retainer, he was probably the son of some noble with a full entourage of attendants.

How pitiful. What was the point of propping himself up on stolen valor? Lying his way into a promotion would come crashing down at some point in the future: the day would come when his lacking talents would be tested.

I had my gripes with those who’d taken the bribes too, but on second thought, I couldn’t be so harsh on them. While I wasn’t sure what house he belonged to, it was clear from his funds and servant that the man was noble, and not just from a knight lineage either—he surely came from a family with a proper title. Refusing a request like this could be genuinely dangerous.

When the reward for honor was retribution, it was hard to justify sticking to one’s guns. The wrath of a noble was as unshakable as it was terrifying, and they had both the money and power to exact any sort of vengeance, no matter how undeserved. Fighting back would just lead to the victim being labeled the criminal—justice wasn’t easy to come by.

“And if I refuse?”

“That is, of course, your prerogative. But what might follow such a decision, well...”

The man folded his arms as if to express how troubled he was; doing so puffed up his mantle just enough to give me a clear view of the dagger at his hip. Obviously, he wasn’t threatening to personally stab me here and now; rather, this was a roundabout way of telling me that— Hey, wait!

Catching a glimpse of the dagger's pommel, I saw a large medal fitted within. Daggers stamped with a family crest were important tools for servants to verify their identities: the best of them could bypass inspections at city gates entirely. This lunatic hadn't taken any precautions in flaunting it. Sure, he wasn't an assassin; there wasn't much risk of dying in the city; and he might need it in his day-to-day life, but...

No, you know what? That alone would've been fine. It would have simply reinforced the threat of the knight's peerage. The actual problem was the emblem itself.

I'd forgone any heraldic skills, but my job had necessitated that I at least memorize the names and crests of all the noble lines calling the Ubiorum county home. This one belonged to a distant relative of House Ubiorum proper, which laid no claim to inheritance but had a substantial amount of land: the Lindenthal viscounty.

Although they were currently on a downswing, they weren't total nobodies, peerage-wise. Why in the world were they out here?

Or more pertinently, which of the viscount's sons was this? As far as I recalled, Viscount Lindenthal had five. The first was a grown man with children already beginning to take responsibilities off his father's plate. The second had applied to be one of the madam's new retainers, but I'd penned his rejection letter on account of wanting talent. That said, he was past thirty as well; it didn't match up with the rumors of a young knight.

If the culprit here was the third son or younger, then this ploy was probably the groundwork to open up career opportunities for one of the boys who wouldn't be able to inherit anything. He wasn't looking to live off the prize money, but rather to win several tournaments just like this one to propel himself into the spotlight. In the best case, he could hope to establish a new knight lineage or find employment under a high-ranking noble—I could see where his ambitions lay.

What an awful scheme. This was one of the few opportunities a lowborn fighter had to sell their name, and he'd deprived them of that. I wouldn't have had any complaints if he'd simply used the opportunity to polish his skills or

fought the battles fair and square, but buying the wins outright was depraved. On top of that, former as she was, seeing someone run around causing trouble right under my employer's nose was tough to ignore.

Gods dammit. Before leaving, Lady Agrippina had told me to let her know if I came across any of her nobles up to no good. How had I *actually* run into one doing just that?

It looked like I would have to be the one to set him straight. If I let this moron loose like this, he'd end up dragging the Ubiorum name through the mud sooner or later.

Quickly throwing together a plan of action in my head, I took the sack of change for now. The man nodded in satisfaction and added in a sinister tone, "I have no doubt you'll stay true to your word," before leaving.

Less than a minute later, Dietrich returned with a bag full of skewers and a whole jar of oats in one hand.

"Who was that?" she asked with a cocked head. "One of the tournament staff?"

"What did I tell you about manners?"

"But all the dumb vendors keep selling these tiny little bits of meat at festival prices to try and jack up their profits. How am I supposed to feel full if I can't even get a good chew?!"

The zentaur had three skewers in her free hand, and had bitten off enough to stuff both her cheeks. Figuring that I owed it to her to explain the situation, I tossed the bag of coins her way.

"Huh? What's... Wait a second!"

The pouch of money, the mysterious man, and the impending grand finals clicked together in Dietrich's mind at lightning speeds. The coin she'd pinched out of the bag cried out with a dreadful squeak as she crushed it with sheer fury.

"Hey, don't bend those," I said. "Money is money."

"But, but—*this*?! Money that you got from following a script?! Don't tell me

you’re actually gonna go through with it!”

Though she straightened up and brought her face right into mine, she stopped herself from grabbing me by the collar. Instead, her hands trembled by her side in a desperate attempt to control her anger.

“This might be a tiny tournament in the middle of nowhere, but everyone here wants to be number one! Everyone who entered! Just to be the best! So—so why—”

“I know. Calm down, Dietrich.”

Her tail flapped angrily, knocking over basically everything in the tent. I placed a hand on her head and flashed her a smile—the most intimidating one I could manage.

“I’m upset too, and I’m happy to see that you’re as angry about this as me. But don’t worry.”

Because this knight is in for a lesson in chivalry.

[Tips] The glory of knighthood shall be upheld by the people, for the knight must be gallant, just, selfless, and valorous.

—Opening preamble to *The Way of the Knight*

The crowd was excited. Two young warriors were about to take to the battlefield: a bout between the dark-horse swordsman and the knight who ended every fight in one hit was sure to be a thrilling conclusion to the tournament.

Every minute, new betting odds were posted, and every minute, more tickets were sold. Staff and spectators alike were brimming with anticipation to see the fierce combat that would soon come.

Would the blond swordsman snatch away victory, evading every hit with his dance-like footwork? Or would the knight place it all on one true strike to cleave his way to the trophy? Those sitting in the crowd could hardly keep their rears planted—that was how great the expectations of this battle were.

Alas, what came was a sight more horrible than any had imagined.

The knight who had ended every fight in dramatic fashion as soon as the curtains rose...just couldn't land a hit.

No matter how hard he swung or how desperately he gave chase, it didn't matter. By the end, he threw off his helmet to reveal a beet-red face, still clearly teenage. He resumed his pursuit with less weighing him down, and even then, he couldn't so much as graze the swordsman.

Meanwhile, the blond boy had come to make a mockery of his opponent. The armor he'd worn in previous rounds had been replaced with plain clothes; the sword he leisurely carried in his hand did not once swing at his opponent. He simply dodged and kept dodging.

Without breaking a single sweat, the swordsman simply watched the knight swing at air with a thin smirk permanently etched into his lips. Just a half step too short; just a few degrees off; just a split second too late—at first, the crowd booed and jeered at the boring display...but as the minutes passed, they fell silent.

The heckling ceased as the audience found itself mysteriously captivated by the bizarre spectacle. Before anyone knew it, an hour had passed.

At long last, the knight ran out of breath. Heaving and panting, he could no longer properly wield his weapon and collapsed onto the ground. Nobody knew whether what they'd just witnessed could be considered a "fight." Perhaps, technically, it met the definition of two opposing parties trying to best the other; in that sense, yes, it was a fight. But to anyone present, the word was far too grand a term for what they'd seen.

This was play: one side was inhumanely toying with the other.

Fatigue sent the knight tumbling, and he moved to prop himself up on his sword. Yet his arms were as wobbly as his legs, and he quickly toppled on his back. Unwilling to concede, he pushed himself up with one arm, but that was the only one of his limbs to respond to his still-burning will.

Content to see that his opponent could no longer stand, the swordsman's lips curled up ever so slightly more as he raised his sword to announce his own

victory.

Not a single person cheered at the appalling display of skill.

How could they? It was as if a man had taken an insect, ignorant of the world beyond their minuscule patch of grass, and slowly deprived it of life, one thin needle at a time. Make no mistake: the display had not been *boring*. Yet the dark excitement bubbling in the crowd was weighed down by a greater horror and pity, brought on by the sheer cruelty on display.

Had the swordsman brought his opponent down in a single strike, the demonstration of their vast disparity in skill would have still taken the form of a duel, and the audience would have reacted accordingly. But this? Was this truly a *fight*?

The swordsman exited the stage before most could come up with their own answer, taking his prize money and vanishing before the award ceremony could be held. The powers around town sent their finest to find the young man and welcome him into their midst; the lord hosting the tournament even ordered his people to offer him a position instructing the next generation of his fighters. Yet all they could find was a trail of smoke.

Perhaps thinking that he no longer had any reputation with which to face the public, the knight failed to appear for his jousting match the next day, as he skipped out on town early.

All that remained was a merciless silence, and an urban legend of the strangest match to ever be fought. Though the tale became a poem, the sneering swordsman was too callous to appeal to most listeners; and so, the records began to fade away...

[Tips] If one of two participating sides in combat loses all means by which to harm the other, the GM has the capacity to declare a victor via narration.

A few scant shadows appeared on the walls of a tent, each armed with a bow or spear. They waited for orders, alert and ready.

Eventually, the man standing outside the circular formation nodded, and the

figure beside him brought down his arm to signal the attack. Arrows zipped into the tarp from every angle, with spears quickly following to end the poor fellow sleeping within.

Or at least, that was the plan.

“Dear me, they certainly do some awful things.”

“That looks like it’d be an ouchie if you were really in there.”

Two days after having left Wisenburg, I found myself sitting in a tree overlooking a campground just off the main highway. I was suited up in full armor, counting on Ursula’s night vision to see what was going on.

Obviously, my tent was a decoy. I hadn’t just embarrassed the knight; if he’d been a medieval samurai, he would have had to cut open his own guts on the spot just to save face. I’d known from the start that he wouldn’t let me go.

After collecting my prize money and winnings—and dodging annoying recruiters every step of the way—we’d left the city. What I had in mind wasn’t exactly something I could quietly get away with in an urban area; our need for a more private staging ground had led us two days out.

We’d trudged slowly along to let them catch up, and I’d asked Lottie to keep an eye out as we did. Tonight, she’d caught a whiff of a clumsy pursuit, giving us the chance to set up an easy trap and wait for them to bite.

I’d gone out of my way to ask the terrifying alfar for a favor because I knew my short-tempered mark would take the bait if I acted fast. With how flagrantly I’d humiliated him, the very thought that I continued to draw breath gnawed at the knight’s mind: he’d need to kill me, dismember the remains, and piss on my corpse just to regain his cool. In which case, setting up a basic ambush while he was still too livid to think twice was the easiest way to take advantage of his wounded pride.

I mean, what else would a man who went around buying tournament wins try to do?

“All right, let’s clean this up.”

With vengeance exacted, the killers moved in to rummage through my tent

and let off some steam; I silently dropped down and began slashing my way down the line.

“Who—agh!”

“Where the—grah! My arm!”

“D-Don’t panic! Counteratt—augh, hrgh! Where...gh.”

In sync, Dietrich charged out of the foliage a little ways away and tore through their formation. She’d rolled her eyes when I told her not to kill any of them, but had quickly changed her tune when I added that “Shame is a penance only paid by the living.” Living up to her promise, she lightly smacked the daylights out of them with a simple stick—scaled to her size—making sure not to deal any lethal blows.

They’d lowered their guard after a “successful” hit and were working with only moonlight to guide them; we had the element of surprise. Lopsided numbers meant absolutely nothing. It was simple work: I just had to break a few limbs with the broad side of my blade, or knock them out with a blow to the head or gut.

Spooked by the one-sided violence, the two figures outside the main circle tried to flee. I stopped one with a dagger, then picked up a nearby stone to down the other.

“Man, these guys are wimps,” Dietrich sighed. “How pathetic can you get? I don’t even get the point of buying a win if you’re this weak.”

“Well, I think this is about what you should expect from someone who wanted to be the best without working for it—especially someone who rounds up a crew of assassins to attack at night after the fact.”

Marching around the groaning men, Dietrich was having trouble figuring out where to direct her anger. It was clear to me that being the best mattered a great deal to her, and she’d been seriously upset that anyone would dare sully the holy struggle of it all; tragically, however, the goons she’d scattered had been too fragile a set of vessels for her fury.

“The best,” she echoed contemplatively. “Yeah, you’re right. You can’t act like a loser if you wanna be number one.”

I walked over to the figure I'd downed with a throwing knife and kicked him over. He rolled off his stomach and onto his back, his headwear slipping off in the process; it was the man who'd bought the fixed match in the waiting room.

"Wrong one. Which means..."

Moving over to the one I'd stoned down, I kicked him over too, revealing the man I'd faced in the finals, his face twisted in pure spite.

Nice. I was hoping you'd want to come see my death with your own two eyes—less work this way. If he hadn't been here, I would've had to waste time in a deep heart-to-heart with his retainer, and nobody wanted that.

"You bastard! Do—do you really think you'll be free to walk away after this?! I'm—"

"Sir Lindenthal, do *you* think *you* can walk away after this?"

"Bwah?!"

Come on, buddy, you can't go acting all shocked just because I said your name. I'd known he was young, but it looked like the boy hadn't even been fully trained as a noble yet. Being able to shrug off one's true name was practically a requirement of any highborn person living under a false identity. That way, he could've written off his retainer's dagger as something the servant had stolen of his own volition and avoided any real scrutiny.

"To think the son of a viscount would go around stirring up trouble at regional tournaments, not to mention rigging the events. As rude as it may be to use your own words against you, sir, who exactly do you think you are?"

My fey-blessed eyes had a clear view as the viscount's good-for-nothing son lost all color in his face. He'd already had a pale complexion as a privileged member of the elite, but he was now so white that he looked like a marble sculpture stripped of paint.

If nothing else, it was heartening to see that he at least understood his actions to be unfit for someone of his standing. I wished he would have taken a less dishonest path to earning a name for himself as a knight.

"I'm sure Viscount Lindenthal will be most disappointed to hear what you've

done. And no doubt Count Ubiorum would be disheartened if she were to learn that one of her dependable vassals may have one less son worthy of her trust."

"Wha—but how? Who are—"

"Please, take a look at this."

I reached into my shirt and pulled out the tiny pouch I always left dangling around my neck. From it, I produced a ring; once it entered the moonlight, the twin eagles gleamed with unmistakable clarity.

"What?! Then you're—mmph?!"

"Quiet, please."

Dietrich was within earshot. I'd already explained to her that I had some connection to a noble household, but I didn't want to divulge any of the specifics.

"First, you must atone for straying off the righteous path. A cowardly knight who flaunts talents he does not possess has no place by *her* side."

"B-But I *must* make a name for myself, and soon. I have reason enough for my actions!"

"Those reasons being?"

The boy shut up, but that only confirmed my suspicions. He had the money to throw around buying glory, meaning his parents were fond of him; I doubted that he was to be sent away to be adopted by a lesser household or that he had personal debts that outstripped his funds.

"A girl?" I asked.

"Wha?!"

"To love is fair enough, and I understand that well-to-do ladies are often only wed to successful gentlemen. But please, take a moment to think: is she the sort of person who'd merrily take the hand of a fraudulent knight?"

"W-Well—"

"Say you earn yourself a knighthood and establish your own little clan. How long before the gilded facade peels away, once your enemies can no longer be

paid to trip over their own toes? When you face other knights with influential backers, hungry to honor their lords with fitting displays of valor, what then?”

As romanticized as knighthood was, reality was harsh for knights. Though the taxes they earned as rural magistrates were enough to make a commoner’s mouth water, the profits were not as they seemed.

A few hundred drachmae in taxes a year hardly covered the military expenditures needed to keep a knighthood afloat. One needed armor and a horse befitting their own stature, as well as a pasture to rear the latter. At least five or so expensive, educated servants would be needed to keep face; five more trained cavalrymen were needed for similar reasons; and to keep the peace, ten or so foot soldiers would have to remain on payroll at minimum. If a gang of robbers set up in a knight’s territory, it was their job to have enough men to march over and crush them. This small force of permanently employed fighters was the *bare minimum* a proper knight needed to deter criminals from entering their lands and protect their citizenry.

That didn’t even get into the expenses of arming and equipping all of these soldiers, plus the eventual maintenance on their gear; nor did it account for feeding, clothing, or housing them. Sitting around and waiting for passive income was not a viable means of staying afloat.

Every knight in the Empire was always looking to prove themselves so that their lord might give them a bigger piece of the pie. Joint training exercises were taken as seriously as all-out war; paperwork was meticulously filed to show off just how attentive they could be if only they were entrusted with more responsibilities. What was more, diligence was perhaps more important now than it had ever been before: the current state of the Ubiorum county was a strict meritocracy.

The seat of a knight was not some cushy throne that allowed the sitter to rest with leisure. Once seated, one had to maintain perfect posture forever, lest their chair be reduced to naught but a bare leg.

“What will the lady in your heart think when you find yourself unable to keep up with those around you?”

“Then... Then what was I meant to do? She’s already of, well, suitable age.

She'll be married off to some other estate if I rest on my laurels—or worse, she might be forced to marry down!"

"And thus the panic, I see... May I ask who fed you this information?"

The boy's eyes flickered toward the man I'd downed with the dagger; that answered that. I surmised that the malicious retainer had fanned the flames of his master's insecurities—probably in the hopes that the boy's quick success would give him a cushier position.

"In that case, Sir Lindenthal, you should have proven yourself not with dirty schemes, but with the integrity of the post you wished for. I take it that the viscounty does not have the resources to prop up a new knighthood for you at this time?"

After a moment of silence, he admitted through gritted teeth, "That's right. We don't. Shifts in power might open up a position soon enough, but any opportunity like that will be taken by my brothers first. My chance will come too late."

"Then you should have simply asked your father to refer you as a retainer."

"A *retainer*?! I'm a viscount's son!"

"Not just any retainer. The shifts in power you mentioned have left the accomplished knights under *her* command quite understaffed, you see. I imagine you would have had plenty of opportunity to prove yourself if you served one of them as a retainer-cum-soldier."

Lady Agrippina hadn't relocated *that* many people to "more scenic positions," but the chain reaction of those who'd lost their peerage had been far-reaching. Relatives of houses that had been totally wiped away had been universally laid off so as not to become a burden on the host lineage.

For my former employer to go through the hassle of executing people, they had to really deserve it: without exception, the ruined houses had made themselves fabulously wealthy off their ill-gotten gains. It followed that their influence was widespread, and many members of those clans had been working throughout the county as servants or knights for other nobles. With how many openings there were, the Lindenthal boy didn't even need to go search: the

seats would have come to him, begging to be sat in.

“Make a name for yourself under a notable knight, and you wouldn’t have needed this farce to carve out your own place in the world. The coming restructuring of the county would have opened plenty of paths to independence.”

“Then...”

“And if you were to promise to return for your sweetheart in the not-too-distant future as a respectable knight, I doubt they would have put up much of a fight. In fact, with the backing of your father, I would imagine your chances of being accepted for any vacant knighthood would be far greater than your average peer.”

“Then what have I been doing until now?!” Kneeling on the ground, the boy slumped his shoulders.

I extended a hand and preached to him the virtues of chivalry: diligence, sincerity, honor, and pride—but not so much as to become arrogant. If that scoundrel I called a master had been here, she would have stuck out her tongue in disgust at these high-minded ideals; yet even she accepted that these were the qualities that made for a good subordinate.

To go one step further, I was willing to say that the madam was genuinely considerate to those who worked well (that is, handy pawns who lessened the amount of work *she* had to do). Although her expectations were catastrophically high, the rewards she bestowed for a job well done always exceeded what was due—a comfortable collar to keep her favorite slaves willfully at hand, no doubt.

“I advise you to rethink what it means to be a knight—no, to be a *fighter*. You may not have been a match for me, but your swordplay was well grounded. What you lack is the spirit to stake your life in battle.”

“My *life*?”

“Yes. To land a fatal blow, you must accept that you will be in range for your opponent to do the same. Only when you’re willing to shoulder that danger will you understand what it means to truly win.”

I pulled the knight to his feet and walked over to the retainer, whose face I tilted up into the moonlight.

“You would do well to rid yourself of unfaithful servants and start again with a fresh slate. Do that, and I will keep this episode to myself.”

“Truly? But I acted exactly against the chivalry you just spoke of.”

If I was being completely honest, it would’ve been way easier to just “happen across” his corpse than to go with this whole schtick about mending his ways, and I’m sure Lady Agrippina would also have appreciated having one less point of potential trouble. Alas, he was a viscount’s son, and, well, *handling* him on my discretion alone posed more problems than it was worth. Hedging against the one-in-a-million chance of word getting out with a hackneyed soliloquy was the safer bet.

I nodded, and he bowed his head and kneeled at my feet.

“You have my sincerest apologies for everything I’ve done. I’m deeply, deeply sorry. I swear to never cast a shadow on my family name again—and I will go ask for my maiden’s hand with my head held high.”

“Then I shall petition the God of Trials and all His kin that you might succeed. And most of all, I pray that your efforts might lessen *her* burdens.”

“Thank you, Sir Secret Blade.”

Back on his feet, the knight ordered his men to wake up and head home. A few of them literally couldn’t get up, but we’d gone easy enough on them that their pals could probably drag them back alive.

Come to think of it, were these all the viscount’s men? I was surprised his son had brought so many along with him. Maybe this little journey away from home had been intended to expand the boy’s horizons safely.

“Pride, huh?” Dietrich had been listening to our conversation, and she lined up beside me with a thoughtful expression.

“I swear it’s important. Not the self-flattering kind of pride, but the dignity to respect yourself and what you truly stand for. Fake fronts don’t ever help either—they only hurt.” Watching her contemplate, I added, “Sometimes, the long

way around can be the shortest path to your goal. For example, if that guy had just worked honestly from the start, he could've saved his money and spared himself from looking like a damn fool. It wouldn't have been easy, but I'd say it would've been better than bearing the kind of shame that leaves scars in the heart that never quite mend."

"Never, huh?"

"Yeah. Even if everyone else forgets...you'll always remember."

Dietrich raised her hand to her neck, grasping at air: the lingering remnants of her own shame were tangible in the empty space that had once been home to her hair. She, too, had been chased out of her homeland for putting up a big front. Now that she was genuinely confronting her past mistakes, the end of her soul-searching might be in sight.

Taking that first step to reexamine oneself was much harder than anyone gave it credit for. I would know: I'd only thought twice about what it meant to pursue my dreams when my baby sister started bawling in my arms.

"Hey, by the way," she said, switching topics, "who is '*she*,' anyway?"

"Well..." As we watched the failed assassins fade into the night, I turned to her with a playful finger on my lips. "That's a secret."

[Tips] Just as many lower nobles will spend time serving higher-class households to round out their education in etiquette, those who wish to pursue military careers will often find temporary employment as martial retainers and bodyguards. Having an intimate view of how the most elite carry themselves is a tremendous privilege, and it is not uncommon to discover that the hired help of a powerful family are, themselves, of impressive peerage.

"I'm proud of you for telling me the truth."

The knight who'd rigged the Wisenburg tournament sat in the Lindenthal viscounty's inner parlor room. Across a table lined with teaware was a graying man: sipping on his cup, the sitting Viscount Lindenthal savored the bitter, sour,

and yet strangely sweet sentiment settling into his heart.

The viscount had sent his fourth son to wander so that the boy might learn something of the world. Imagine his surprise when, with no warning, he had returned, requested a private audience, and confessed to his wrongdoings out beyond the realm of the Ubiorum county.

The boy laid out all his misdeeds in detail, bracing himself for the punishment that was sure to come; yet with them, he lowered his head and begged his father for a chance to redeem himself.

As ashamed as the man was to discover his son had done wrong, he caught a bubble of joy surfacing in his soul: that his boy *knew* what he'd done was wrong and was earnestly trying to right himself was a point of pride.

However, the boy's growth was all the more reason not to go easy on him.

The viscount stripped his son of his allowance and most of his many attendants, and barred him from commanding the family's personal troops. In exchange, he promised to refer him to a knight with whom he was close. Friends though they were, the viscount knew that the knight would not go easy on his son: directly serving Count Ubiorum, the established warrior had free rein to treat a nobleman's son just the same as a farmer's. If the boy didn't put in the effort, he'd be kicked home in no time.

To offer a second chance was a parent's love; to impose a demanding trial was a noble's obligation. Both of the man's duties came through in the decision, and his son was filled to the brim with gratitude.

Despite having to grope their way through the uncertainties that would no doubt come, the pair enjoyed the rest of their tea, basking in the warmth of their mutual understanding—until, on a whim, the son changed the topic.

"By the way, I was very surprised to discover that the count's personal dagger was the one to set me back on the right path."

Both the College and Rhinian pantheon were involved in the conservation of imperial emblems, and faking a noble's crest in the Empire was a tall task. Faking an oral or written commendation aside, physical symbols engraved with a coat of arms were so heavily safeguarded that even if it were hypothetically

possible, the risk wouldn't be worth the reward.

Erich was of the understanding that he'd just been given a fancy ring with the official Ubiorum stamp of approval. Yet the father and son knew just how arduous the hoops and hurdles of the process to make it had been, and correctly discarded any semblance of doubt that the ring might be fake.

"There's no mistaking him," the father agreed. "I saw him once when visiting the count. A slender mensch boy with a dainty face, barely of age or thereabouts; long hair, blond, and blue eyes. There must be a good number of people who match that description throughout the Empire, but surely not that many."

Having been worked to the brink of death at the time and socially unfit to speak directly to the nobles he dealt with, Erich remained unaware that Count Ubiorum's Secret Blade was well known throughout the territory. Swaths of meddlers and ne'er-do-wells littering the lands had snapped beneath his heel, and no one could even count the number of nameless hitmen who'd disappeared after trying to take him as their last mark; give it any thought, and it would've been stranger if he *hadn't* been a major topic of interest.

"But to think the rumors were true..."

"What rumors, Father?"

"You've heard that Lady Agrippina has put together a crew to seek out rare tomes and fables, I assume?"

"I have. I remember seeing literary scholars applying to the recruitment drive, excited to put their studies to use."

"The truth is, I've been given word that the program is one big cover."

"A cover for..."

Seeing his son's confusion, the father laid out their new lord's master plan.

To begin, it was a given that behind her charming smiles was an ice-cold pragmatist, fully intent on clearing out the rot in her territory so that she might steer the future of high society with her influence. There was simply no other explanation for the ruthlessness she'd employed in her dealings with Viscount

Liplar—who had thrown around the weight of his strong outward connections so much that few in the county actually missed his presence—and his entire bloodline. That wasn't even to mention how quickly the rest of the worst offenders had been hanged shortly after.

This was a field where accurate intelligence and careful preparation were king: anyone with half a brain knew that the good count had to have an impressive network of spies.

"The count claims that the tome-searchers were a gift from His Majesty—a reward tailored to her personal interests for a job well done..."

"...But Lady Agrippina would never do something so frivolous?"

"Precisely. The rumors were that she'd managed to secure a legal loophole to dispatch her agents everywhere—even abroad. Now that you've come into contact with one part of the puzzle, it seems safe to say the rumors were true."

No one with any stake in the county had taken the news of the Secret Blade's retirement at face value. The count had no reason to let go of him, and he had no reason to abandon a post in which he was so thoroughly trusted.

The viscount stared off into space, prompting his son to ask what he was going to do with the information. They could share the intel with their allies or even sell a favor to a neutral third party—the weight this news carried meant it was a powerful tool.

The chaos of the Ubiorum county appeared to be cooling down on the surface, but a mad scramble to prepare for a new world order was taking place just below. Its long history as a territory of the crown meant very few local lords could claim a totally clean slate, and among them, many had to assist their less scrupulous relatives to not risk a domino collapse.

Agrippina's distaste for vested interest and immunity to bribery were well-established facts at this point. Any bribe that arrived at her doorstep was invariably sent back with an added "reward" just to drive the message home; those who tried to plead with government agents for favorable treatment were curtly notified that the person in charge of their inquiry had changed. It was glaringly obvious that the old Ubiorum ways would not be enough to survive.

Earning favor with the pitiful souls who were desperately trying to stay afloat was a good opportunity; using them to stave off Agrippina and preserve his own lineage was even better. Ready to put his plan into action, the viscount made up his mind to send the message to his allies.

“Call for a bard.”

“Uh... A bard?”

“That’s right. We’re going to share the discovery by way of song. Let’s see, what should the piece be titled?”

In a strange twist of fate, these were the circumstances behind a play that would go on to withstand the tests of time. Depicting a strict, yet passionate count, *Her Excellency Rights the World* told the tale of a wandering hero, stamping out injustice throughout the lands with her merry band of helpers.

[Tips] *Her Excellency Rights the World* is a theatrical play written in the first half of the sixth imperial century. Following a kindhearted count and her small crew of unique retainers, the tale regales their efforts as they hide their identities to bring justice to the struggling peoples of the world—though, if you were to ask a certain blond mensch, you’d be told the story isn’t all too novel.

Prior to its release, “The Goldene Krone” was a commonplace name for retailers throughout the Trialist Empire of Rhine, but the connection with the villainous and greedy merchants of the story (who ran a business under the same name) forced almost all of them to rebrand.

Early Winter of the Fifteenth Year

Quests

As the “role-playing” part of “tabletop role-playing game” suggests, a party’s goals must find their way to them within the fiction. This can come in the form of a destitute villager begging for help, a young damsel being chased, or a messenger bearing a request from a mysterious sender.

Though a GM will groan that the story can’t advance unless the quest is accepted, it is the role and privilege of the PCs to assess a quest-giver’s intent. The villager could be an exiled crook out for revenge; the girl might be a runaway thief; the letter might come from insurrectionists seeking to set the party on the path toward revolution.

Having a zentaur on her knees before me was quite the peculiar sight. With her hands on her lap and her head hung low, I figured this was as close as she could get to groveling.

“Please,” Dietrich squeezed out through gritted teeth. “Please...lend me some money!”

I scoffed and turned my attention out the window, blowing a puff of smoke into the pouring rain.

Some time had passed since the tournament incident. Konigstuhl was closer than ever, but we’d spent the past two weeks trapped in the same city—our every attempt to leave had been met with the worst of luck.

Just as we first tried to leave town, we’d been locked in by the city guard: some morons had, amazingly, managed to pull off a heist on an imperial tax caravan, and no one was allowed in or out during the manhunt for the culprits. I’d been utterly blindsided upon hearing the news; I knew we were pretty far out into the countryside, but that was just plain suicide. Their honor on the line, the imperial patrol held nothing back and froze everything in place, including us

travelers. They weren't going to let disguised bandits waltz up to the city and scout out their plans, after all.

Dietrich and I weren't imperial messengers, nor were we troops, nor did we have a noble backer to negotiate our passage. Unable to leave, we'd headed back to our inn, where the keeper welcomed us back with a few words of consolation on our misfortune.

A few days later, a procession of knights paraded through town with severed heads adorning their spears. Glad to see the situation solved, we packed our bags...only to *then* receive word that the bridge we planned on taking had been destroyed. Apparently, the tax-raiders had used some mystic tool or another to blow the thing up in an attempt to slow down the authorities.

The local lord had gathered craftsmen from around the area and called for his pet mage—by my estimate, this city was too rural to afford a proper oikodomurge—to rebuild the passage. In the meantime, the whole route was closed.

Although there was a bridgeless detour, it came with a lot of extra ground to cover and had no inns to speak of on the way. With winter fast approaching, I couldn't be asked to subject myself to the hassle. The magistrate's official announcement assured the people that the bridge was an important local fixture and would be repaired as quickly as possible; with that in mind, the extra time and effort we'd spend taking the long route couldn't be worth it.

Less than an hour after checking out of our lodging, we were back in the lobby. The proprietor eyed us with wonder and, overcome with pity, even gave us a small discount on our extended stay.

Finally, we caught word at the pub that the reconstruction was to be finished in one day's time. Heading back to pack our things ready to finally resume our journey, we woke the next morning with a torrential storm rolling in. The frigid, wintry downpour was biting, and many an experienced wayfarer elected to delay their departure. We decided to defer to their expertise; in a world where a common cold could become life-threatening, trying to tough it out in the wet cold was the work of a fool.

I had to go downstairs and ask the innkeeper to cancel our checkout and let

us extend our stay—again. Unable to hold back his incredulity any longer, he'd said, "Are you guys cursed or something? I'd go over to the church and ask for a talisman or something if I were you."

The rain had poured for three days now with no end in sight. But, hey, them's the breaks. Any sufficiently long journey was sure to have its share of stoppages; whether the God of Wind and Clouds was fighting with His brethren or simply in a sour mood, the weather was not something for us mortals to understand.

Besides, the trip from Konigstuhl to Berylin had been riddled with similar incidents. Though, I suppose in fairness, those had been caused by Lady Agrippina's indolent distaste for stepping outdoors at all when it was so much as drizzling—I was probably best off not using that as my benchmark. It didn't feel right putting that on the same level as the deluge I faced now.

"Hey! I'm begging you! Please, come on!"

"Hrm, I'll need to prepare more pipe stuffing soon..."

"All I've had to eat for the past three days is plain porridge! I haven't even had a *sip* of booze!"

Dietrich's desperate plea went in one ear and out the next as I tapped my pipe on the windowsill to empty the ashes within. The mix I used for recreational smoking was near to bottoming out; I'd need to visit the town apothecary to get some herbs before we left.

"Ah, but heading outside in this rain is such a chore..."

"Come on, don't ignore me! Hey, *please*?! One libra—just one! I'll make do with the cheapest beer I can find!"

The proud Hildebrand warrior must've put her pride in storage somewhere. It was getting hard to ignore this numbskull in her entirety, though, so I shot her a derisive sideways glare; Dietrich didn't even flinch and continued to shamelessly beg.

There was no need for me to expound on why she was groveling on the floor. She'd said it herself: she was so broke that she couldn't even afford a drink.

An observant reader might remark, "Wait a second! I thought she won *fifteen drachmae*," to which there was no defense. Unbelievably, this massive buffoon had managed to squander three times what my whole family made in a year in the span of less than a month.

And no, she had not bought any of the things she actually needed.

I'd let her be, thinking that she'd learn best from a costly mistake, but I hadn't imagined it'd be *this* costly. I should've scolded her somewhere along the way.

Her lavish spending at the tournament had already gotten me worried, but her looseness with money legitimately boggled my mind. I understood that she probably hadn't needed to save up in the closed world of her tribe, and she'd still had all the basics accounted for until her party abandoned her. But that she would be so audacious when she hadn't even bought herself a change of clothes was so baffling that it wrapped around to fill me with awe.

Dietrich had spent the past month or so staying in nice inns, eating nice meals, and drinking nice liquors to her liking. When we took root in this city, a traveling merchant who was stuck here with us had sold her on a bunch of dubious junk. By the time I checked back in on her, she no longer had enough to buy her own damn sleeping mat.

Ugh. As much of a pain as it would've been, I should've gone with her when she said she was going for a walk...

"Pleeease! Seriously, *hey*! I can't live like this! All you give me are the cheapest meals, and you won't even let me drink *anything*! Don't you think that's too cruel?!"

"But smoking the stimulants when I'm not even tired is such a waste... Oh, and I'm running low on red tea too."

I turned away once more and stuffed my pipe again—her pleading only grew more desperate.

I'd snapped when first hearing the news and, while I hadn't moved us to a cheaper inn, I made sure her meals were nothing more than the bare minimum. Spoiling her here would do neither of us any good.

She'd had fifteen drachmae—*fifteen*. Put to dollars, that was something like two hundred grand. That put her in the upper earners of the Empire, and she could have easily retired to a small house in a minor city with enough spare change to start up a modest business on the side.

How in the name of every god in the skies had she managed to blow that kind of fortune in one month without buying any property or—I don't know—maybe a single one of the many items she needed going forward? All she had was a bag full of crap to her name, and she wasn't about to fool me into thinking it was worth what she'd paid. I wasn't going to take care of her forever, and it was high time that I drilled some fiscal sense into her; a life of tedium was the perfect teaching tool.

"Oh, but it's *so* cold outside." I flashed a large silver piece in my palm. "If only there were someone I could trust to run my errands..."

"Me! I'll do it! I'll go get your stuff, so please!"

The gleaming coin reduced the so-called proud Hildebrand warrior into a gudgeon hooked on my line. I felt bad for the poor tutelary spirit watching over her.

"Go to the apothecary and ask for everything on this list, as well as two bags of red tea. The change is yours to keep."

"Yay!"

I flicked the silver piece toward her, and she snatched it out of the air before it could reach the apex of its trajectory. I braced myself for a complaint from the guests below; Dietrich scrambled out the door in a clamorous frenzy.

It seemed forcing a heavy drinker off her nectar for three days straight had really weighed on her. I hadn't known how much zentaurs loved liquor; I bet she could go pint for pint with a dvergar.

Too lazy to get up and close the door she'd left wide open, I pushed it shut with an Unseen Hand and relit my pipe. I took a long drag, swearing to myself that I'd make her earn her keep again—and next time, she was *not* allowed near her money.

If only things were so easy: Dietrich returned an hour later, having stopped by the bar *before* her errand and "accidentally spent all the money." In response, I stamped a painful red hand onto her ass and tossed the moron out of the inn.

[Tips] Zentaurs are so infamous for their love of alcohol that they—and not dvergar—are the stereotypical drinkers of northern and eastern cultures.

At long last, the clouds began to part, and the innkeeper saw us off with words unthinkable for someone in his line of work: "I'll be praying to the gods that you won't come back."

"Ugh, I need to make some money," Dietrich sighed. "I thought I'd be fine since it's so cold back home, but the Empire is pretty chilly too—especially after the rain."

The Harvest Goddess was well into Her season of slumber, and I was snugly bundled up in a comfy set of winter wear. My traveling partner, on the other hand, was walking around wearing the same half-sleeved shirt I'd met her in. Despite my offers to buy her something warmer from a secondhand store, she'd refused on the grounds that it'd restrict her movement.

Zentaurs were as resilient to changing weather as their fully equine counterparts; they usually dressed light even in the dead of winter. According to Dietrich, she burned more calories this way—a fact I was not enthused about—but I couldn't bring myself to force her if it was going to affect her performance in battle. I'd gotten her a large mantle for when it rained, but it was shocking to see that one piece of cloth was all she needed to stay warm. To be honest, I felt vicariously cold just looking at her, and I wished she'd layer up a little more.

"I'll go see if there's anything good," Dietrich said, trotting ahead.

A handful of caravans were gathered up just before the city gates, waiting for

bodyguards or hired help to answer the requests they'd posted on the nearby bulletin board. Excited to see a potential customer, some scribes loitering in the area came up to offer me their services; when I told them I could read, they spat on the ground and left. *Courtesy sure is hard to come by in small towns.*

Setting the rude copyists aside, I'd already taught Dietrich to read basic Rhinian, and she was busy looking through all the papers she could. Unfortunately, not many travelers wanted to push their luck in the harshest season, and the pickings were slim. Had I been alone, I probably would've been the one hiring a guide with a stagecoach to proceed.

"Hey, what about this one?"

She pulled a sheet of parchment off the wall and brought it over: though the job didn't offer any daily wages, the payout for a safely completed journey was an earth-shattering *drachma*. Plus, in a wild stroke of good fortune, the destination was Innenstadt—the closest city to my hometown of Konigstuhl.

Innenstadt was an ancient city: originally an independent city-state, it was famed for its thousand-year-old city walls. Nicknamed the Old Town by the people of nearby cantons, it was the only real urban center in our area. The abundance of artisans living there made it cheap to buy necessary tools, and farm families like ours often made the trip to sell produce; everyone in the region regarded it well.

"That's hardly seven days away," I said. "A drachma for that is...quite the sum."

"Says here you gotta pass an interview—and today's the last day! We can't pass this up!"

I was on the cusp of saying we ought to be wary, but I felt it might be a bit mean to douse Dietrich's excitement, and decided to at least hear the other side out. Interviews went both ways: just as the employer would be scrutinizing us, it was an opportunity for us to scrutinize them. If the job seemed doable, we'd be a gold coin richer; if not, we could just refuse.

The requester's carriage was parked by the gate guardpost. Not only was the coach suspended, but it was a double-horse buggy with traces of magic to boot. Still, I didn't spot any family crests, and the exterior was a touch too plain to be

a noble's vehicle.

A handful of men with sour expressions walked past us as we approached—they'd probably just failed the interview in question. It seemed our quest-giver was cautious and selective. *Plus one point.*

"Are you here for the interview?"

The man waiting in front of the carriage was, for lack of a better term, an ill-fated-looking fellow. He was mensch, and a little older than myself. Though I suspected he'd be decently handsome in stylish clothes, my honest opinion of his plain appearance was that he looked like a background character to the point of stereotype. Despite seeming to be a nice person, I had little faith I'd be able to recall his features if asked to describe him from memory. I'd spoken at length in the past about how Miss Nakeisha's face was too spotlessly pretty to stick in the mind, and he was the same, just painted in more mundane strokes.

That said, he was neatly kept and the sword at his belt looked to be of respectable make. While he wasn't exactly tall, he filled out a tidy set of flaxen travel wear; more to the point, the movements of his gaze spoke to a trained eye.

His attention came first to my weapon and arms, then to my feet, and only then did he slowly look up to meet my gaze. Unlike the average layman, his first look at me was one of threat analysis.

Putting together his good posture with his impeccable servile palatial speech, I guessed he was probably some aristocrat's private soldier. Er, actually, I'd forgotten his carriage didn't have a coat of arms, and there didn't seem to be any other bodyguards present—he was probably employed by a wealthy family that was not technically noble.

"That's right," Dietrich answered. "Wait, no guards? That sure is a nice carriage to be riding without an escort."

"No guards, I'm afraid. Our employer was kind enough to permit us to use this carriage along with our leave, but our accompaniment ended up busy at the last minute, you see."

"*Dietrich*," I scolded, digging my elbow into her side. "Introductions first."

Sticking out her tongue to make it clear she hadn't done it on purpose, she quickly said, "I'm Dietrich of the Hildebrand tribe. And this is Er—"

"Erwin of Waltesch." I jabbed her again. This dolt always forgot that I used an alias when dealing with strangers. "Pleased to make your acquaintance."

"The pleasure is mine. I am Rudolf of Fulda."

The man politely returned my bow and began laying out the details of the job.

Rudolf and his childhood friend were servants of some influential house—keeping their employer's name undisclosed was fairly standard—and had just been given a long leave of absence to honor many years of loyal service. As such, the pair were to head to their hometown of Innenstadt.

His childhood friend Bertha was the personal maid to the young lady of the house; they got along well, and the privileged daughter had arranged to let the pair borrow a carriage for the journey.

However, the family's bodyguards would obviously have to stay behind in case the young lady or her parents ever needed to travel. The servants had instead been given a stipend with which they were to hire their own protection; alas, the mercenary crew they'd had their eyes on had left town just as they were preparing to depart, leaving them stuck searching for a quick replacement.

"You two seem capable," Rudolf observed. "And we'll be able to move along without delay, seeing as you are zentaur and you have your own steeds. Please give me one moment."

After looking us over, he climbed up onto the carriage step, knocked on the window, and whispered inside. Though his mannerisms were a bit grand to speak to an old friend, being a pseudonoblewoman's private maid put her in the upper castes of the household. Judging from his trimmed hair and fresh shave, Rudolf was more likely a valet or footman; it wasn't too strange that he'd be reserved around someone who was akin to his boss.

...Or was it? It *did* feel a bit odd for a pair of lifelong friends on vacation. Still, it wasn't anything that immediately raised the alarm.

"We would be most pleased to have you accompany us. I am Bertha of Fulda.

It is ever so reassuring to have guards as formidable as you by our sides—I'm sure I shall be able to rest easy knowing I have your protection."

The carriage door opened to a beautiful girl that was striking in all the ways Rudolf was not. Bertha, too, was a mensch, of similar age to her companion. Yet she was small and slender, and the air about her not that of a servant, but of the served. Her long face was pretty in all the ways the upper crust liked to be. Long, straight, golden locks that bore the hallmarks of delicate care flowed around two pale azure dots that shimmered like a calm lake. My lasting impression was one of a girl who knew nothing of hardship.

The combination of blonde hair with a gentle and genteel smile made my mind wander to Elisa. They weren't strikingly similar or anything, but I couldn't help but think that my tiny baby sister would soon grow up into a lady much like her.

Also of note was that Bertha's skin was white—not just unexposed to long hours of sunlight, but thinly veiled in a layer of powder. Her lips were an unflattering red due to an excess of rouge, but that made sense: servants were expected to be purposefully gauche to some degree so as not to step on their masters' toes.

I tried to examine her hands and wrists, but her winter gloves were too packed with cotton to glean anything. I would've been able to come to a definite conclusion if I could confirm the signs of menial labor—like cracked skin from working with cold water—but it was impossible to tell under such thick leather.

"I can't imagine a bad actor would dare try anything with a magnificent zentaur warrior defending us. Rudolf here is very capable, you see, but I was worried because he doesn't seem very scary, now does he?"

"Oh, Bertha, please..."

Her feminine palatial tongue was good—but was it *too* good? The intonation of her voice was certainly one that came from a privileged background, but it straddled the line between a blue-blooded girl's and that of a thoroughly educated lady-in-waiting.

Hrm... Are you really *a servant?*

While I had my misgivings, I couldn't deny that pseudonobles employed retainers that were often far more graceful than the heirs and heiresses of lesser noble and knight households. Compared to Kunigunde, the maid at the Bernkastel estate, Bertha's class was nothing to write home about.

Mm... This is a tough call.

"Leave it to me! Most crooks'll turn tail and run if I just stand up front. And I just took home a few first-place prizes at a tournament a few cities back."

"My, how impressive!"

But, well, Dietrich seemed fully intent on taking the job, and I was fully intent on making her earn her keep; the drachma was tantalizing. Though a horse was out of the question, she could probably get a donkey for fifty librae and get most of her missing gear in order with whatever remained. We hadn't decided whether we'd keep traveling together past my destination, but whether I was there for it or not, I couldn't just let her keep running around without the means to make a living.

Plus, this was the first time Dietrich had ever shown any initiative when it came to earning money. I didn't want to put her down. I may have had to swallow back a few doubts, but this was within my acceptable tolerance of risk: the deal was done, and we accepted the quest.

[Tips] Families with last names may technically be lower than all titled aristocrats on the social ladder, but they often boast much greater wealth and influence than those commanding lesser territories. At the end of the day, wielding power is a de facto exercise, and official labels mean little in the face of overwhelming money and manpower.

Two days had passed since accepting the escort mission. Although my doubts hadn't cleared up, they had yet to progress into anything more than a gut feeling.

My confusion primarily stemmed from the possibility that Rudolf's doting care for Bertha was the result of his being hopelessly in love. The only chore he asked of her was a shift of night watch, but it was easy to imagine why a

lovestruck man would make himself busy spoiling the object of his affection. Yet on the other hand, women helping with laundry and cooking was a societal given: that she didn't participate at all was definitely unusual.

Perhaps most brow-raising of all was that the two slept in two separate tents. Yes, an unwed man and woman of age sharing a tent was scandalous—but that was *if* they were upper class. An average commoner might indulge themselves with a personal tent if they were particularly well off, but I wouldn't expect it from two childhood friends heading back to the same hometown they grew up in together.

Then again, it wasn't enough to call foul by any means. As before, it would be perfectly fair to chalk things up to Rudolf's trying to impress the girl of his dreams with a taste of luxury. Bertha had also turned out to be a bit of an airheaded romantic, and it made sense to me that a man who knew her well would want to provide her with privacy.

After a couple of days spent picking over the scenario in my head and making no progress, we'd finally crossed the repaired bridge when I heard a cacophony of hoofbeats echoing out behind us.

Working overtime to make up for the stretch of bad weather, the breathtaking blue of the sky stretched out unobstructed until it hit the faraway horizon; beyond it was the noise of four or five jockeys in a rush. Judging from sound alone, they were traveling light, without a vehicle or cargo.

I suspected they were imperial patrolmen: though restrictions were easing up a bit, many had remained in the area to hunt down any runaway convicts. We'd seen them pin the bandit chief's bearded face to the castle walls in triumph back in town, but there had been surprisingly few men made forcibly taller on the racks. The knights had probably gotten word of some survivors or something; either way, it wasn't strange to see them frantically riding around well after tax season.

Being the furthest back in our line, I pulled out a whistle and blew two quick peeps: *Open a path.* We common folk had no right of way if a noble, knight, or government agent needed to get through. Tugging at Polydeukes's reins, I was ready to slow down and let the officers through when they finally entered my

line of sight.

They were decidedly *not* imperial cavalry. You see, part of a patrolman's duties was to look scary enough to dissuade any would-be criminals. To that end, they dressed in glorious armor and waved majestic flags announcing their presence—usually one each for their unit, knighthood, and the noble lord of their region. It was utterly impossible to mistake them for an off-duty knight, a noble's personal force, or a mercenary.

That's why I was absolutely certain that the group heading toward us was not an imperial patrol. Sure, they had full armor and helmets, long spears, and burly warhorses, but nothing on their persons identified them in any way.

Before I could waste any time thinking about it, I blew my whistle three more times: *Full speed ahead!*

Outside law enforcement, the idea of running around public roads in full armor with weapons bared was not very polite. Even mercenaries and adventurers were expected to dress as plainly as was reasonable, and sheathing any blade or pointy bit was a given. To do otherwise was to threaten passersby, and many people would take that as reason enough to preempt an attack.

Yet the five cavalrymen who'd come into view were charging straight at us fully armed. Even the charitable reading that they were emergency reinforcements hurrying to help fell apart: common sense would dictate that they slow down a notch and greet us so we wouldn't get the wrong idea.

Forgoing any semblance of civility, I couldn't shake the ill omen that this was some kind of ambush. The carriage had slowed down in confusion, but Dietrich managed to shout them along; I let them go on ahead as I drew Schutzwolfe from her sheath.

"Stop! Name yourselves!" I positioned myself to block the road, raising both my sword and voice to issue a word of warning.

They did not stop. In fact, they sped up. Had these been reinforcements rushing to a fight, then my salutation would've had them cursing under their breaths, but they would've had no choice but to stop and name their affiliation and destination. If they were noble, they could've just shouted me down with a mystically amplified, "Get out of the way, cretin!"

That they did neither meant one thing: they were the enemy, and we were the targets.

“Gods dammit, I *knew* it’d turn out this way!”

For as much as I’d complained about not being able to confirm my suspicions, I hadn’t said *anything* about wanting tangible proof I was right! I pulled Polydeukes for a quick turn and kicked him to take off—away from the enemies, of course.

Despite shifting into a pursuit, the five horsemen lined up in perfect formation with their weapons precisely synced together; I stood no chance one-on-five. I could’ve blown them to bits in one go with magic, but doing the same with a sword and shield was a tall order.

By fanning out in a zigzag pattern beginning with the vanguard in the center, their arrangement was specifically tailored to corralling a small enemy force of cavalry. Trying to dip past them on either flank would still get me caught, and breaking through the middle would see me skewered from two directions at once. At minimum, I’d need to be able to comfortably handle a one-versus-two on horseback to take them head-on.

Unfortunately, I wasn’t exactly an equestrian specialist. While my Jockeying skill kept me far out pf the depths of incompetence, I wasn’t confident about my chances against an experienced rider. The instability a moving steed introduced created a whole different dynamic from swinging a sword on stable ground.

Argh, if only I could use Unseen Hands, I could fight with total disregard for the issues of balance; if I hopped off Polydeukes, I’d probably just win the fight outright. Tragically, though, that would leave me with no recourse if any of them slipped past me.

The ban on spellcasting was proving to be a great challenge. Lady Agrippina had told me to be clever and all, but the difficulty of the task was finally setting in. Though, in fairness...the *real* task was just to *look* like I wasn’t a mage.

Tucking up, I reached into my saddlebag to pull out the trusty crossbow I’d fallen in love with this past year.

Come on... Come on! There has to be something!

I fired off a bolt just to keep them at bay. They dodged, obviously, but it bought me enough time for epiphany to strike: their horses were unarmored.

Hah, I've got just the thing.

Rifling through the saddlebag with an Unseen Hand, I opened up a small spice pouch. Entrusting one payload each to five Hands, directed fistfuls of seasoning went flying toward the enemy steeds.

"Whoa! What's wrong?!"

"Hey now! Whoa!"

"Wha—hey?! Calm down!"

The horses went into a panic. The first in line suddenly reared, knocking its rider onto the ground; three more came crashing in from behind, either slamming into the horse or stumbling over the man. While the caboose managed to succeed in swerving away at the last minute, the horse was still too frenzied to be piloted.

Who could blame the poor beasts? After all, I'd interrupted their full-speed sprint by stuffing their noses full of horseradish; I could only imagine the awful burn they were feeling in their sensitive noses.

Horseradish had come into the Empire from its origins in the northern archipelago, and the stuff had a stinging, bitter acidity when grated to a paste. My tongue was growing up alongside my body, and I'd just so happened to get hooked on it recently as a way of adding flavor to cheap jerkies and sandwiches. Additionally, the painful burn mellowed out a bit when grated in bulk and left to sit, leaving me with a lot of stock; it seemed coincidence was on my side. I'd always known filling out the Miscellaneous column of my item sheet would do me favors eventually. I felt a bit bad for the poor horses, but they'd just have to take it up with the guys riding them into battle.

Phew, that settles that... Or so I thought, until I faced forward to find another two horsemen closing in *ahead* of me. Before I could even panic, the fighter's instinct in my core sent me into action.

The first passed me on my right, aiming for my neck with a parting blow. I'd tossed the crossbow for my shield as soon as I'd seen them, and managed to deflect the strike while slicing at his torso with the sword in my other hand.

Not a moment later, the second one followed up on my left. Following through with my swing, I flipped Schutzwolfe to a backhand grip. I held my shield perpendicular to my body, diverting the thrust of his spear and opening him up for my counter. As he zoomed by, I took out a long chunk from his nape to his earlobe; with his windpipe popped open and a third of his neck gone, he let out a dying gasp like the squeak of a creaking door.

I turned around to see a nearly headless rider stumbling off on inertia and a lifeless corpse being dragged by the foot stuck in his stirrup. It seemed the first man I'd grazed hadn't managed to untangle himself before being knocked out on the ground and had been yanked around to his death as a result. Obviously, the man whose head was only attached by a thread of flesh hadn't made it either, and the force of gushing blood quickly pushed his body over.

"Wh-What the hell? How was I supposed to know they'd come from *ahead*?"

My mind finally caught up to my sympathetic nervous system, and my heart sped up like a fire alarm in surprise. Heaving and panting, I could feel a cold sweat run down my back. They hadn't been a threat beyond countering by any means, but I hadn't expected to be attacked from the front when that was the direction my *allies* were in. I'd let them go on ahead for a reason!

"Heeey! A couple of goons went—oh, you got 'em."

Calming myself with deep breaths, the ally in question came trotting along. In lieu of her bow, she had her battle-axe in hand—still wrapped in cloth, by the way. She hadn't managed to get it off by the time the enemy caught her, but that didn't mean she hadn't engaged them; that much was evident from the blood and guts pocking the brown hemp of the covering.

Dietrich herself was also absolutely dripping with blood. She'd put on her scalemail to look the part of a tough bodyguard, and the whole thing had been dyed a deep red-black. Someone had been waiting for us—someone strong.

"What's the situation?" I asked. "Fill me in."

“Well, I tried to let the carriage go on ahead, but they’d set up a roadblock with a fence of stakes and seven whole guys. It was really tough—I mean, I could’ve just jumped the fence and started swinging, but the carriage was stuck, you know?”

From there, our client had stopped to avoid a crash, and even more horsemen had jumped out from the foliage to charge the vehicle and snatch away Miss Bertha.

“What about Rudolf?”

“He had to pull the carriage back real hard and went tumbling. I saw him sorta catch his fall, but I’m having him rest up for now.”

“Then more importantly, Miss Bertha is—”

“Probably right there.”

I followed Dietrich’s pointer finger to a big black bag tied to the horse of the decapitated rider. Looking closely, the saddle was made for two, and the suspiciously humanoid sack in the back seat was wriggling around: it was indeed the lady we’d been hired to protect.

“H-Holy shit. Thank the *gods* I aimed for the jockey. If I’d gone for something flashy, she would’ve died.”

“I did everything I could, okay? There were just too many of them. It isn’t my fault they got to her.”

“Yeah, and it isn’t mine either.”

Who in their right mind could possibly find fault with us for our performance here? I’d been a *bit* suspect of the whole situation, of course, but seven cavalrymen and seven more infantry lying in wait was just ridiculous. There was no chance in hell three people plus a noncombatant could get through the whole thing without any slipups; even with a proper defensible position, a normal fighter would only be expected to stave off three enemies. If anyone was at fault here, it was the pair drawing out this unbelievable number of foes.

Neither of the kidnappers were in any condition for a heart-to-heart talk, and the survivors from the first five had probably already retreated. Unfortunately, I

suspected the men who'd been manning the roadblock would be lucky just to be vaguely corpse-shaped; Dietrich's weapon was even less suited to nonlethality than mine.

If only Lady Agrippina were here, I could've lopped off a head and asked her to extract the relevant info. Alas, psychosorcery was much too expensive for me to dip into.

"Is Rudolf in any shape to talk?"

"The way he fell was pretty ugly, but he's conscious, at least. I say go for it."

Then it looks like our contractor will be sitting on his knees for a while.

[Tips] Legend has it that the Emperor of Creation would force his vassals to kneel on their own feet whenever he chewed them out; this evolved to become the traditional imperial posture for a guilty party attempting to atone. Bone structures among Rhinian mensch are ill fit for the position, and it is considerably painful to maintain for extended periods of time.

Pulling the unconscious Miss Bertha off the horse, we picked up Rudolf and moved into a secluded wood a ways out from where we'd been ambushed. Things were sure to take a turn for the troublesome if an imperial patrol showed up, after all. Well, that, and the place was as dreadful a scene of carnage as one might expect, and we didn't want the young lady waking up only to faint again; I considered myself more used to gore than most, and even *I* felt a bit sick looking at the bloodbath.

One of the horses drawing the carriage had snapped a leg in the emergency braking maneuver. Sad as it was, we couldn't do much for it and put it out of its misery, linking up Castor to help pull the vehicle. My thoroughbred had spent the better part of his life doing the same for the madam, so I knew he'd be able to handle it, but he did seem a bit miffed about having to haul a heavy cart again.

Hopefully, the coming explanation would relieve him and I both of the burdens we carried.

“Now then,” I said, “I think we deserve the truth.”

“...Where should I even begin?”

Forcing Rudolf to kneel by the fireside, I’d pulled out my pipe just to look extra domineering. I honestly felt bad putting him through the wringer when we’d just popped his shoulder back into place, but the story was best set straight sooner rather than later. After staring daggers at him for a spell, he finally cracked, explaining that their request was genuine, but their backstories were not.

“I am, as I said, Rudolf of Fulda. But the clan I serve is no ordinary family... I work for House Wiesenmuhle.”

“*The* Wiesenmuhle?!”

“What’s that?”

The name Rudolf dropped was so shocking that I thought I was going to black out. House Wiesenmuhle was one of the most revered families in the history of the Trialist Empire of Rhine: they drew their lineage from one of the Thirteen Knights. So vital were their contributions to the foundation of the country that Emperor Richard himself had bestowed them with special knighthoods that placed them in direct service to the crown.

Half of those original thirteen had been lost to the sands of time, becoming testaments to the transience of glory. Yet of those that remained, the Wiesenmuhles could trace an uninterrupted bloodline all the way back to their founder, Sir Wiesenmuhle the Divine Arrow.

Anyone growing up in the Empire knew how the tale went. Wave after wave of enemy forces crashed toward the flank of the First Emperor’s army, but Sir Wiesenmuhle faced the onslaught alone; firing a blessed whistling arrow into the heavens, he put the horde’s horses to sleep and bought Richard time to win and regroup.

To this day, lower nobles bowed down to the Thirteen Knights. Why was one of the top dogs of the Empire *here*?

“I am a soldier and retainer in training at their estate. My mother had served as one of our lady’s—Lady Helena’s—wet nurses, and despite my common

birth, I was given the great honor of growing up alongside her on account of our close age."

Bertha's true name was Helena von Wiesenmuhle. The youngest behind four brothers, she was the princess of the family; in fact, not only was she the only girl, but the last girl to be born into the main line had been three generations removed. Naturally, everyone including her extended family pampered her to the highest degree.

This was *nuts*. She was so famous that I'd already heard about her just from my tangential dealings in high society. I even knew the current Sir Wiesenmuhle oversaw jager operations for imperial audiences, and sometimes even advised His Imperial Majesty directly.

Why in the gods' names...

"And what might such a fair lady be doing in the middle of nowhere? The Wiesenmuhle estate is a considerable distance east, and the family's first princess ought to be socializing in Berylin at this time of year—I imagine she must be searching for a suitor soon."

"The madam of the house hails from this region, and my lady was to spend her winter at a nearby estate, you see."

"I wasn't asking for logistics. I was asking for intent."

"Well..." Rudolf made a face, and after much internal struggle, squeezed out, "It would seem we are eloping."

Sigh. Yeah, figures. Here was a young, homely, unfortunate-looking man and a prim and proper lady unused to the world traveling alone by carriage; add in their awkwardness in plain clothes and the girl's unfounded excitement, and that was pretty much the only explanation to be had.

I know, I know: I should've known. And, hey, I *had* suspected something. But, just—come on, one of the *Thirteen Knights*?!

"My lady recently received a proposal, you see, from Baron Attendorn."

"Wait, Baron Attendorn? That...rings a bell."

I'd come across the name in my time following Lady Agrippina into banquets;

in fact, I'd even accompanied her to one where I'd met the man. I'd put together the four-piece combination of a VI: Superb—unchanged from when I'd been twelve—Memory stat and three skills: Name Recollection, Face Recollection, and Associative Memory. It hadn't been cheap, but it wasn't all too expensive for the end result of being able to recall tons of info from any one element. Despite knowing I wouldn't work as a retainer forever, I'd invested in the extra skills thinking that a good memory would always be a boon going forward.

"Surely you must be talking about his grandson," I said. "The baron is well into his golden years."

The Baron Attendorn in my mind was a graying mensch. The Emperor handed out little golden badges to mensch nobles at age sixty as a small token of congratulations on a long life, and I didn't even know how many years ago he'd gotten his.

I'd gotten a good look at him when he greeted Lady Agrippina at some feast or another. He'd been joined by his son and daughter-in-law, who were both middle aged themselves. The idea of the baron's son marrying Miss Helena if his wife passed away wasn't totally out of the question—though we'd need to hypothetically close our eyes to the gap in stature—but I witnessed the missus being very much alive.

Meanwhile, there was no universe in which a Wiesenmuhle girl would be taken as a mistress; her rank was simply too high. The only family that could get away with that would be House Graufrock: they'd need both imperial prestige and legendary military clout.

"You seem awfully well informed," Rudolf said, raising his brow.

"Old connections," I dismissed. "At any rate, the baron may be a widower, but the window for him to remarry has all but passed. The Attendorn inheritance is practically set in stone at this point, and I don't see how he could negotiate for the hand of House Wiesenmuhle's sole princess."

"Yet my lady heard the news with her own two ears. And not just by herself—her maid and bodyguard corroborated the story."

According to Miss Helena's account, Sir Wiesenmuhle and Baron Attendorn

had been in the middle of a private meeting in their estate's tea room; not knowing of the guest, she'd gone searching for her father only to accidentally eavesdrop on their conversation. The knight had sent away his guards so that no one would be in earshot, and the thinner walls of the annex the tea room was located in meant the girl had had a clear chance to listen in.

Sitting herself down in the room next door, her curiosity had gotten the better of her and she'd mischievously put her ear to the wall in order to find out who the surprise visitor was. It was then that she discovered the agreement to marry her off to the baron, and the scheme to sneak her away had quickly followed.

"Then you mean to say that this idea was the work of all of her servants?"

"That's correct. Unfortunately, the urgency of the situation meant that I was the only one able to accompany her. The others stayed behind to buy us more time..."

The thoughtlessness of it all made my head ache. Holding back these kinds of foolhardy plots was part of a faithful retainer's duties.

"You don't understand," he insisted. "My lady was so overcome that she couldn't so much as drink water for the next three days, and we at last caught her with a knife, ready to take matters into her own hands. The only choice we had left was to—"

"What about her parents?! If she was bedridden, then it should've been your place to appeal to them in your master's stead!"

"The lord and lady returned to the capital immediately after the secret discussion!"

"Then pen the knight a damn letter!"

"We *did*! Yet all that came back was a roundabout nonanswer!"

Miss Helena had interpreted her father's tiptoe response as confirmation that the worst was as she'd feared, eventually leading to the current situation. Her retainers had all been trained to place their loyalties with her first, and only then with the family; seeing beads of scarlet sprout from the tip of her blade had convinced every last one of them to cooperate.

Callous as it was to comment from the sidelines, poor Rudolf and company had been at a crossroads where both paths led to hell. They'd be branded kidnappers if they helped her escape—painting it as voluntary would harm the Wiesenmuhle name—and her suicidal attempts would slip past them eventually otherwise, where they'd be executed for failing to protect their master. Hysteric as she'd been, imprisoning their noble liege would be such a slight on her dignity that they would, again, be executed. They weren't just backed into a corner; they were in a non-euclidean space where every corner had more corners.

Thank the gods the madam had the decency to at least give me two real *options.*

"I see," I sighed. "Then do you at least have some kind of asylum to run to? You would need to escape beyond the Empire and its satellites to outrun one of the Thirteen."

"Sir Wiesenmuhle is very sweet on his daughter, and he can just as easily adopt a girl from his wife's extended family if he wishes to consummate a political marriage with Baron Attendorn. I suspect that if such a deal goes through, my lady may lay low for a year or two and return without penalty."

Words unspoken made themselves loud behind the man's thin smile. His lady would indeed return without penalty; he and his compatriots would not. They were all prepared to lay down their lives to uphold their lady's honor. In fact, seeing as we'd been found, the rest of his friends were already... Perhaps it was best not to say.

"Okay, I get all that, but how'd you end up eloping? I thought you were just trying to get your master out of a marriage she doesn't want."

I didn't know whether she simply didn't understand the gravity of the situation at hand or her housecarl roots made her think that Rudolf's actions were the obvious choice to prove his loyalty, but Dietrich retained an unconcerned attitude about the whole affair. *What I would give for just a fraction of your nonchalance.*

"Ah, well, you see... It would seem my lady mistakenly believes that I was the one to spur everyone into action in order to save her from the wicked

marriage.”

“I can’t even begin to fathom how that would happen,” I interjected.

“It’s a very embarrassing story. I was her main playmate as a child, and she happened to remember a juvenile promise that we’d marry one day...”

Augh. I buried my forehead in a palm. It was one of *those*: a pair of kids read a book or listen to a saga about a knight who saves the princess, complete with a romantic proposal scene; they play pretend; and one of them takes it seriously, warping their perception of love for years to come. The tale was common enough—but having the daydreaming girl be a real noble princess was a genuine problem.

“That helped to get my lady on board, and everyone told me to keep quiet so as not to demotivate her as the plan went into action. In Lady Helena’s mind, I stole her away to elope, and the rest of her staff cooperated to cheer us on.”

Eyeing him for a moment, Dietrich asked, “And you’re okay with that?”

“I do love her dearly. But I have no fantastical notions of making fiction into fact—I know my place.”

Rudolf’s sad smile must have been the product of a long-fostered affection. His adoration was tempered by understanding, and the reality of their positions had crushed his emotions whole.

Sick of this charade as I was, my brain fired on all cylinders contemplating the best path forward. I had to admit that a seventeen-year-old girl being forcibly wed to a sixty-plus geezer was pitiable. The details of a family princess with shiny gold hair babied by her four older brothers also struck a chord with me, summoning Elisa’s face to stoke the flames of my compassion.

However, making an enemy out of one of the most powerful knighthoods in the entire Empire was too great a gamble. This was as scandalous as scandals got, so I could feed the story back to Lady Agrippina—as an ace in the hole when she needed good blackmail—to not be killed, but that was a steep price to pay just for survival. I didn’t want to go around spending more than what was in the proverbial bank.

The shortest route to resolution would be to knock Rudolf unconscious, wrap

Miss Helena up, and head back the way we'd come. Depending on how well we negotiated, we could even expect to receive a thank-you bonus from the knights, as well as a bit of personal favor with *the* knight. The whole affair would surely leave a bitter taste in my mouth...but I was angry enough that I almost didn't care.

A dishonest employer was a bad employer. Adventuring was full of sinister villains ripping off the mask with a sarcastic apology, and I'd endured my fair share of them, but that did *not* mean I had to accept it. Requests made under false pretenses were practically standard in campaigns that involved political elements, but it was worth considering how tabletop gamers actually responded to such developments.

Barring a few exceptions where the circumstances were particularly tear-jerking, we were a class of people ready to set off for revenge with single-minded zeal. My PCs had murdered countless backstabbers in the physical sense, and just as many in a social sense.

Make light of me, and you die—while it wouldn't sound out of place as the code of honor for a trigger-happy samurai, this was an unforgettable maxim for all who dared to inhabit the mortal plane. Vengeance did not have to be immediate, but it did have to be guaranteed; otherwise, the cocky requester was sure to push another ludicrous quest in your direction.

"Let's lend a hand. It's not like we have to keep helping them forever."

"What?"

Just as I got to the point where I'd begun contemplating rolling the dice to decide, Dietrich derailed my train of thought. I looked at her, dumbfounded, and she casually flapped her remaining horse ear in response.

"You have a plan if we can get you to Innenstadt, right? I mean, you're not going to send her ten days away on horseback and pretend you're done, are you? Back home, King Godwin woulda sent a whole army out by the day after, so."

"I do. We knew we'd be caught if we all operated together, and a few fellow retainers have gone on ahead to prepare for a long-distance escape."

The plan included a fake Innenstadt citizenship and a sympathetic mage who could concoct an elixir of disguise. Despite how hastily thrown together the plan had seemed, I guessed they did prepare some of the groundwork; I probably should have expected as much of a team with a Wiesenmuhle education.

"If we can reach Innenstadt, the rest will come together. I plan to remain in the city to confront Sir Wiesenmuhle, to beg him to consider my lady's feelings. If that audience ends with this head removed from my body, then so be it."

"But what about your family?" I asked. "You said you were lowborn: they'll all die for your actions. If the man loves his daughter as much as the rumors say, then he'll go after your third, fourth, or even fifth relations in retribution."

"My father was a kinless orphan who died when I was very young, and my mother, the wet nurse, was an immigrant who came to the Empire alone. Three years ago, a passing plague took her back to the gods' laps as well. All I have left to lose is my lady."

Tragic resolution tinted his thin smile. At a loss for words, I could do nothing but heave a massive sigh.

"That's what I call guts," Dietrich said. "Come on, is abandoning them what it means to be a true warrior? Here's a man's man putting his life on the line out of loyalty, and he's trying to save a young girl from marrying some rotting old fart to boot. Tossing them to the wolves sounds pretty heartless if you ask me."

Dialing in on her strongest point, she passionately insisted that saving a maiden from a loveless marriage was exactly the stuff of legends—but did she *really* understand?

Whether within the Empire or beyond it, plenty of luckless young ladies found themselves married off to men as old as their grandfathers every day; the same could be said for the boys. The upper class never worried about their next meal or toiled until their bodies ached; the price for their comfort was universally paid in the emotional burdens responsibility carried. One had to ask: was an unwanted marriage any worse than living and dying knowing nothing but hunger? Was it a fate more cruel than huddling around an extinguished fire as a final chill seeped into the soul?

Bounty was begot only by those who had sown their own seeds. I couldn't

even begin to imagine how many commoners could have subsisted on the money it'd taken to raise Miss Helena. That may be the nature of feudal life, but context didn't change the dynamic.

On top of that, Dietrich evidently didn't understand the principle of good faith. I was willing to admit Rudolf and his friends were cool and manly and the like, but *we* were just the ones he'd roped into this mess. Perhaps her status as a foreign housecarl made it difficult to see the dangers, but I'd prefer if she spent more time looking after her own safety.

If the initial request was built on a lie, then who knew how many more lurked in its wake? Even in an unprovable hypothetical where Rudolf wasn't lying anymore, there was still the possibility that this whole farce was built on a string of misconceptions.

That said, I had to acknowledge the reality that my traveling partner seemed very enthused to offer our help. Taking the story at face value, Miss Helena was indeed in a pitiable predicament; it was hard to pass up helping the damsel in distress now when I'd followed the trope to a tee for Miss Celia.

And Elisa's image kept flashing in my mind.

Ugh... I wonder what my old tabletop party would have done?

Actually, I shouldn't have asked: they would've been excited at the prospect of fighting strong foes and thrown themselves into battle to churn out gold and experience. Thinking about it was a waste of brain space. I'd spent too much of my past life chasing thrills and bloodshed to look for guidance there.

Truthfully, I was starting to sympathize with the two of them. Miss Helena truly did remind me of Elisa in some ways, and Rudolf's readiness to lay down his life for the cause was admirable. Abandoning them entirely did, admittedly, gnaw at my conscience.

After all, had it been my sister being married away to a sixty-something geezer, I would've killed Lady Agrippina if it meant selling my soul to Lady Leizniz in the process.

Sighing for what felt like the umpteenth time today, I gave in: we would see the pair to Innenstadt.

[Tips] The joys and sorrows of marriage are but a daily affair in the realms of the privileged.

By the time night fell, we had abandoned the carriage and were slinking along on forgotten roads. On the former matter, we'd lost a horse and had to keep moving; the big box on wheels was going to be dead weight. On the latter, our stint on the main path had already gotten our VIP captured once; anything in public view was best written off entirely.

"We're thinking about heading south." As we circled a campfire, Miss Helena wrapped her hands around a cup of red tea and quietly spoke over the crackling flames. "Our destination awaits beyond the Southern Sea and the city-states on its west banks: the Southern Continent. If we can slip into the old Hierarchy I'm sure you've read about in ancient stories, my family will no longer be able to pursue us."

From there, she and Rudolf would buy a farm and live a quiet life thereafter—delivered with a pure and innocent smile, her daydream was the product of a posy-filled head.

The Hierarchy traced its roots to the latter days of the Age of Antiquity. Although it had maintained unbroken, divinely conferred sovereignty for eons, frequent wars and infighting over lines of succession had curbed its prosperity. Facing a declining population, the gods at the helm lost an equivalent amount of power; worse still, they'd been forced to sue for peace in a treaty which opened their borders to foreign missionaries, weakening the nation further.

They'd traded blows with the Trialist Empire in the past over suzerainty of coastal city-states and holds on the Southern Sea. If I knew my history right, the Empire had dealt them a massive defeat three hundred years ago and had won a great deal of gold in the ensuing peace talks. I had seen the massive statue of gold they'd brought home standing tall in the imperial palace, its face censored to limit the output of hostile divine power.

Considering how we'd heartlessly marched off with one of their most prized holy relics, I doubted the average Hierarchical citizen had a very positive

opinion of Rhinians. Yet I supposed it was still a better choice than the satellites, where war broke out at a moment's notice, or the Kingdom of Seine, whose people knew us only from a never-ending history of squabbles.

Whether it was better than alternatives or not, the fact of the matter was that moving from the industrially gifted Empire to the struggling Hierarchy would be tough. The constant wars had supposedly stunted their national manufacturing capacity; I could believe it, seeing as the only products that made their way here were a smattering of aromatics, dyes, and silk. From what I understood, their equivalent to the Harvest Goddess blessed them with regular floods that kept their harvests strong enough to keep the state in one piece.

The downgrade in quality of life from our home nation would be immense, and the trip would probably take nearly a year to make. Could a pampered princess take that?

I glanced over at Rudolf, and he met my gaze with another tired smile and a small shake of the head: they weren't actually going.

In that case, my best guess was that they planned to stop her in one of the satellite city-states *not* under imperial control. She wouldn't enjoy the same luxury as at home, but it would be serviceable, and they could lie about how trouble in the region was anchoring the ships they needed or something as they waited for the storm to blow over.

With her subordinates' dedication and care obvious to see, the sheer blindness of the lady herself was just so...*ugh*. Miss Celia had been comparable in her headlong nature, but at least she'd possessed the prudence to limit the number of people she involved as best she could.

"I have some talent with the needle," Miss Helena went on. "The Hierarchy is famed for its silk, and so I hope to lessen our burdens by selling little embroideries. The needlework on Rudolf's handkerchief is my own—won't you please show them?"

At his master's order, the man handed over the doily. It was certainly impressive work for a hobbyist noble, but if I were asked whether it'd sell to patrician clientele, the most I'd be able to muster would be a polite smile.

For better or for worse, it was okay. For reference, I didn't share the lady's

refined sensibilities, but on a purely technical level, I could probably match her technique as I currently stood on the back of Dexterity alone. Her skill sat in a perfectly awkward valley where it was too great to be affordable by commoners, but too wanting to satisfy members of the upper crust.

You've got a tough road ahead, Rudolf.

I whipped up dinner with some of our rations, tuning out the details of an imaginary future to concentrate on our plan going forward. The main challenge would be to keep in the right general direction while limiting our outside contact to a minimum. Covering up all our horses' tracks was impossible, but we'd be better off if we could at least hide some; a few detours through routes that might confuse trackers were probably in order.

After first interrogating Rudolf, we'd doubled back to the main road and had him examine the bodies. He hadn't recognized any of them, and they hadn't been carrying any identifying possessions either; when I went through their wallets, there wasn't any noticeable pattern to the mints of the coins inside. It was safe to say they hadn't been working directly for House Wiesenmuhle.

The head of the family had probably wanted to avoid causing an internal commotion. In an attempt to control information, he'd probably borrowed or hired local pawns from reputable sources. That, or there was simply a special unit within the clan dedicated to shadier work that Rudolf had never seen.

Whichever the case, they now knew the rough outline of our plan. Rudolf had assured us that his compatriots back home hadn't been told anything from the Innenstadt squad—they'd divided up the work so that none of them could divulge any information about the others. Yet with our location revealed, the future was looking bleak.

If they cast a wide net, we risked being found even on the back roads. Once we got to the city, sneaking in would present its own host of challenges—that is, if we even made it there at all.

In an unfortunate turn of events, we had a river to cross if we wanted to reach Innenstadt. The only bridge in the area was located just by the main road, and they were obviously going to be waiting there.

Local farmers had probably put up their own smaller bridges known only to

them, but despite being close to home, I was not local enough to know about them. In Japanese terms, this area would be “in the same city” as my childhood neighborhood: nobody knew the ins and outs of a street six stations down the line unless their primary hobby was going on walks.

Fording the river was a no-go. It was both too wide and too deep for the horses, and our sheltered princess would never survive a swim in the cooling weather. Seeing as we didn’t have the headway to build her a raft, our only options were to bet on luck and search for a passage or to try breaking through the inevitable barricade.

On top of all that, we were working on a time limit.

As I stirred the pot to keep the bits at the bottom from charring, I could see my breath puff into the air. The forest was always freezing at night, but it was even colder now than what I remembered from my time camping in the shelterbelts by Konigstuhl. At this rate, snow would fall sooner rather than later.

This region saw a decent amount of snow that rarely piled up; however, the gods had made Their temperament known in the past few weeks, and the odds were high that the Harvest Goddess would be tucked in for Her slumber this season. Fairies of winter and frost seemed to be running around as well, so I was absolutely sure the weather was going to worsen.

I was the picture of health, and worrying about a zentaur freezing was pretty much unnecessary. I mean, just look at her: Dietrich’s arms were still exposed at this very moment, and she didn’t care one bit. As a trained bodyguard, Rudolf was in good shape; if he had survived whatever plague had taken his mother, then he could probably tough it out.

Unfortunately, the same couldn’t be said of the princess. One needed spare little thought to recognize how an orchid carefully grown under glass would fare in the harsh outdoors. Forget the coming snow: I was worried she’d catch a cold *tonight*.

I planned to lend her my heated stones, and we’d set up her tent next to the fire with the person on night watch keeping it alive. Yet the delicacy of a girl raised in the lap of luxury was unknowable—especially for a fragile mensch.

“Let’s do our best together, Rudolf.”

“...Yes, my lady.”

The heroic servant smiled to preserve his master’s happiness. From where I sat, I could do nothing but watch in silence.

[Tips] The weather often shifts with the gods’ moods. Staying divine rage and envy to sustain livable weather is but one part of the churches’ duties.

Having established that each of us—barring Miss Helena, of course—would take turns keeping watch so that we’d all get a chance to rest, I began laying out my sleeping bag in the big tent. Rudolf would take the first shift while Dietrich and I rested; after three hours I would take his spot; then finally Dietrich would see us to sunrise.

Considering how grave the situation was, I’d also asked Ursula to lend us a hand. Our enemies were no opportunistic thieves, after all. No matter how lightly I slept, I doubted a trained scout would have enough presence to wake me, and I was a little uncertain as to whether Rudolf could handle one by himself.

In order to keep our profile as low as possible, we’d slimmed down our camp: other than Dietrich’s tent, we’d only put up one of the smaller ones Rudolf and Miss Helena had brought. Our VIP slept in the personal tent, while two out of the three of us would take turns occupying the larger one.

As I laid out a big sheet of bedding for Dietrich—I’d bought it for her since the weather was getting so cold, but she definitely owed me this time—she slipped inside. I could hear the sound of clinking metals behind me: she was probably taking off her armor.

Personally, I planned to wear at least enough to jump into a fight at a moment’s notice. Yet before I could wonder why she’d forgo proper protection, the sound of cloth rubbing across skin followed.

Are you serious? Changing in a shared tent? I got up with a sigh—only for a hand to stop me by the shoulder.

“What’s up?”

The words *Is something wrong?* remained caught in the back of my throat. When I turned around, I came face-to-face with an unconcealed set of abs; I looked up to see two tremendous beacons of womanhood dangling before me.

Her sun-baked skin abruptly lightened around her chest, which was evidently tucked away in daily life to not impede her bowmanship. Unbound, its heft exceeded my imagination. Where the rest of her skin was dotted in tiny scars, those rolling hills showed no such blemishes as they rose and fell with the rhythm of her breathing.

We were so close that I could see every minute detail. Though I doubted the warrior paid much attention to personal care, her supple skin looked like it had never once gone dry; suddenly exposed to the cold air, faint goose bumps ran across its breadth.

The winter could likely be blamed once more for the light, jagged peaks at the top of the snowy mountains—or was it the same excitement that had warmed her to the point of radiating heat across the empty air? Her mensch upper half began to descend upon me, her cheeks faintly red, her eyes twinkling, and her mouth ever so slightly ajar. Slightly out of tempo, her breaths turned white as they entered the chilly night.

It was at this moment that I realized that Dietrich's face was not as childlike as I'd led myself to believe. The immaturity I ordinarily felt must have been the product of the innocent pride always gleaming in her eyes; when her expression was as solemn as this, she truly did look the part of my senior.

Many times larger than any mensch's, her heart pounded loudly enough for me to hear as she approached. Her hands reached out around me while I stood mesmerized, and just before her chill fingertips made contact with my neck...

"What do you think you're doing?"

"Oww?!"

I reached up to meet her stooping head with a flick to her forehead. A solid sound echoed into the tent, leaving a bright-red mark where I'd booped her. Dietrich had apparently not expected that, and recoiled while holding her forehead.

Although her faint blush, superhuman warmth, and thick musk had frozen me in place for a moment, I wasn't gullible enough to be seduced by something like this.

Do you know how many times I'd seen the madam stark naked? My perception of beauty was broken, and not even in a good way: acknowledging her attractiveness wasn't enough to overpower my sense of reason.

Putting the skills I'd learned in high society to full use, I donned my poker face, steadied my breathing, and held in the rosiness of my cheeks. From

Dietrich's perspective, I probably looked totally unfazed.

"The hell's that for?!" she yelped.

"That's *my* line. What's gotten into you?"

Dietrich glared at me with teary eyes, but I was really the one who ought to have been confused. It was well known that demihumans tended to go into heat in seasonal patterns akin to their animalistic heritage, with little to no desire outside those periods; still, this was out of absolutely nowhere. Horses tended to mate from spring to fall: it was rather late for that.

"I mean, well... It's just, um..."

"Their tragic love story got to you, huh?"

"Shut up!"

Bull's-eye. Dietrich's remaining ear twitched and her tail flapped around in discontent.

"What kinda man turns down an invitation from someone as hot as me, anyway? Any other guy would've been happy to wrestle all night long. You know, it's kinda hurting my pride that you haven't even *tried* to steal a peek when we're staying in the same inns all the time."

"You *idiot*. Do you understand the situation we're in? That's a total death flag!"

"Death...flag?"

Getting down and dirty when the going gets tough is textbook, page-one foreshadowing that you're going to get murked. Did the God of Horror Movies beam horny signals into her brain or something? I wasn't going to bite, but I could already envision the silhouette of someone raising a massive weapon being cast onto the side of our tent.

"Setting that aside," I said, rerailing the conversation, "seriously, what's gotten into you?"

"Well, I mean...how do I put it? Listening to them talk about their plans for the future made me want to take you home with me for real. Is that so wrong?"

“Ohh, right. I forgot about the nonsense you spouted when we first met.”

“It’s not nonsense!”

Hey, don’t get mad at me—it’s not my *fault I didn’t take the babbling of a sore loser seriously.* I could tell now that she wasn’t joking, but, I mean, come on. There was a process to this sort of thing: couldn’t she at least have tried flirting first?

“Watching them made me realize how nice you are and how much you’ve taught me. I mean, you saw how ditzy the girl was, right?”

“At least call her *naive* instead.”

“Whatever. Anyway, that helped me recognize that I really do want to bring you home and introduce you to everyone.”

Sitting down and making herself small, Dietrich began fiddling her fingers together—that the sudden shift in demeanor struck me as cute was a secret to remain unspoken.

“All the stuff you said got me thinking about why I wanted to become a warrior in the first place. It wasn’t just because I was born into the role, but because I had someone I looked up to. Looking back, I wasn’t living up to my ideals at all.”

“If you’ve already gotten that far, then you’re most of the way there. I’m sure that’s what the chief of your clan wanted you to learn when he sent you away.”

The risqué atmosphere had evaporated, but the signs of an earnest discussion took its place, so I sat down to face Dietrich properly. Thinking deeply about every word, she slowly but surely began to lay her heart bare.

As a child, she had been good at everything, but the best at nothing. The number one spot had always gone to someone else, and they’d invariably be the target of her envy and frustrations.

To be the best was to be the coolest—and so, Dietrich wanted to be the best. Tunneled in on this one idea, she’d found herself charging forward alone on a battlefield and sent away from her home.

“In the end, I just wanted recognition. I wanted people to look up to me, to

want to be like me. That's why I kept pushing myself to be better than everyone else."

Frankly, I found it surprising that someone as skilled as her hadn't been the best at anything among her people; yet it must have been true, as it was the source of all her troubles. She'd convinced herself that only the uncontested greatest deserved to be admired, and the insecurity that belief generated had backed her into a corner. All the while, the original reason she'd wanted to be the best at all had been lost to time.

"It's like I was running a race without a finish line," she said with a self-deprecating laugh. "My dream wasn't *just* to be the best, but to be a hero that everyone could look up to—and I never realized that I was doing all the wrong things to be that. You can't be cool if you don't have dignity and pride, right?"

The little zentaur girl had looked up to a hero who bettered himself no matter how much praise he received, and yet never looked down on the young crybaby who couldn't seem to win anything.

Now, the grown zentaur woman had unearthed that long-buried dream and was ready to chase it once more.

"But you saw me for who I was. You thought about me: about what I should do and about what kind of person I am. I could've done without all the *nagging*, but...it made me really wanna take you with me."

The last vestiges of her hardheaded shell crumbled off, leaving behind the face of a pure warrior. Dietrich had learned the true nature of the greatest goal a warrior could pursue, and she had transformed into a proud champion marching toward it.

"I see," I said slowly. "So that's what it was."

I got up on my knees and crawled over, placing a hand on her head. Running my fingers through her glossy dapple-gray hair, I parted it in places to caress the scars beneath with great love. I brushed against the stump of her missing ear with gravity, as if to say, *Nobody has given up on you: not your people, and not you.*

The lesson was one close to a warrior's being. "Do I have what it takes?" was

a doubt that froze any forward momentum—it was a fighter's death sentence.

"Then I guess there isn't any more for me to teach you. Dietrich, you've grown strong. The nagging ends here."

I'd second-guessed my decision to bring her along, wondering whether it was arrogant of me to try and reeducate what I thought to be diamond in the rough; now, I was truly grateful I had. My cheeks naturally pulled up into a smile, and she answered with a genuine grin of her own.

I had taken this wayward soul and returned her to her rightful place as a warrior—my idealistic daydreams had actually *helped* someone. Rare were the occasions that could match the joy I felt now.

All smiles, we basked in our mutual respect and acknowledgment. Finally, the zentaur warrior rose to her feet and proudly puffed up her chest.

"So, wanna do it?"

"*Idiot.*"

"Owww?!"

Joy quickly turned to disappointment as I flicked her on the forehead again.

"That wasn't where this was going?!"

"Of *course* not, you dolt. Now put your tits away and go to bed already."

"*Dolt?!* Okay, I know I'm not *that* smart, but don't you think that's a bit mean?!"

"Not at all. Keeping watch will be grueling if I don't get enough sleep, anyway. *You* might be able to get away with just a few hours, but we mensch need a full night of rest."

Sigh. Time to hit the sack. I'd invested in traits that minimized the sleep I needed, but my growing body needed all the shut-eye it could get. Napping during the day was off the table in our current situation, so I had to pack in the hours while I could.

"Hey, wait! Are you really gonna sleep when someone *this* hot is naked right beside you?! Hey—*hey*!"

“Shut up already. What are we gonna do if you wake up Miss Helena? You better take the next shift if you keep making all this noise.”

“I can’t believe it. He’s actually trying to sleep. Does this guy have anything between his legs?!”

A deluge of northern insults involving my privates followed, but I simply tucked myself in until she inevitably gave up. Rolling onto the bedding I’d bought her, she took a pinch of my hair that had spilled out from my sleeping bag and played with it, whispering, “Don’t you think that I’ve given up.”

Swallowing back my curiosity on what she even wanted from someone half her size, I chuckled and silently dozed off.

Later on in life, I would learn that mensch arms are apparently well regarded among zentaurs, but that was a lesson for another day...

[Tips] Procreation between couples of differing racial backgrounds is less reliant on matching precise shapes and more on the sure delivery of package to receptacle. As such, it can be argued that physiques matter little in the grand scheme of conception.

Fortune and misfortune will cancel out in the end.

Some know-it-all had sung these words somewhere, sometime; yet now more than ever I found myself thinking that maybe they were right.

I mean, until now, the world had always demanded I repay any tiny stroke of good luck with a healthy helping of interest, so it’d been hard to believe. However, as we were struggling to find a crossing two days into our lives on the lam, we came across a group of hunters.

Winter was hunting season. One group of magistrate-backed huntsmen had been chasing down a wild boar when we ended up right in their path. Driven mad from the pursuit, it attacked us and we had no choice but to put it down; it was dead by the time the huntsmen caught up. Explaining to the men that we didn’t have any license to take down big game in the area, I offered to hand over the kill in exchange for a bit of guidance—to which they happily agreed,

telling us of a nearby bridge.

Though it was a little ways out, there was supposedly a local bridge if we headed north for three days. A woodsman had built it specifically for them, and it was sturdy enough to support the weight of a wagon carrying a full load of timber.

Things were looking up. The bridge was off the beaten path, only known to locals: the odds were good that there would be no lookout there. If nothing else, it was worth checking out.

“Want me to go on ahead and see?” Dietrich asked as soon as the hunters left.

“No, I think we should stick together for now. Being split up would be the worst-case scenario if they find us.”

A three-day jaunt wasn’t worth the risk. Turning back toward the main road wouldn’t yield us any new options anyway, so it’d be safer to begin a new search for alternatives from the local bridge if it came to that.

Still, we needed to hurry. The biting cold grew worse with every day, and all the cotton in the world stuffing my coat wouldn’t change that. Heated stones were becoming less and less effective; snow was surely soon to come.

“Are you okay, my lady?”

“I’m—ngh,” Miss Helena coughed. “Ahem. I’m fine, Rudolf. The air was just a tad chilly against my throat.”

As I’d feared, Miss Helena was losing out to the elements. Although she had yet to develop a fever or any lasting symptoms, it was clear that she was beginning to come down with something.

The light cough she’d exhibited just now was one sign, and the other—as ungentlemanly as it was to point out—was that she was having trouble with her bowel movements. I didn’t know whether she couldn’t get over the mental barrier of doing her business outside or if all the stress was having physical effects on her body, but her bathroom breaks were blatantly and worryingly few.

“I’m sorry, my lady. As crude as it would have been, I should have packed something thicker than this fur coat...”

“Please, Rudolf. I was the one who picked this, remember?”

Yet her spirited smile and lack of complaints proved she was strong. It was an impressive feat for a well-to-do lady to spend days without a toilet, a bath, or the simple ability to wash her hair and *still* keep her composure. I really admired her self-control. Her head was still full of posies, but it was clear that those mental flowers were blooming with great majesty.

“Spring is heralded by the cold: the warm winds sweeping across the Harvest Goddess’s luscious locks are a privilege won by braving freezing gales.”

Figuring that it would be boorish to point out that the worst of the gales had yet to come, I let the lovebirds be and went on ahead.

[Tips] According to Rhinian mythos, the winter begins when the Harvest Goddess enters Her yearly slumber; Her antagonistic sister, the Silverglaze Goddess, then arrives to claim providence over winter and cold.

As an aside, the pair’s bad blood stems from a love affair in which the Harvest Goddess won the hand of Her present husband, the God of Winds and Clouds. Unwilling to cede Her feelings, the Silverglaze Goddess is said to intertwine her wintriness with His domain while Her sister sleeps, giving rise to the snows of the season.

When chasing prey, encirclement is a key technique: hunters will often band together to more efficiently trap a mark in an enclosed area.

The thing is, the technique works just as well for hunting humans.

First, a person known as a beater is tasked with running ahead and chasing the target into the main force of the party; from there, the hunters can spring their trap any way they want.

And we found ourselves perfectly caught in one such ambush.

“This is bad... We’re pretty much completely surrounded.”

Two days had passed since we'd run into the huntsmen. We'd set up camp on pace to reach the bridge by midday the next day, but things had hit a snag. Despite everything progressing smoothly on the first day, we'd begun to notice stalkers in the distance the day after, and our current path seemed to be playing right into their hands.

"We can't go any farther north," I said. "They're slowly closing in on the west, and we can't turn back south either..."

"Looks like we got ratted out," Dietrich said. "Well, I guess we *do* stand out."

"That sounds about right. Dammit, they're way too good at this."

I agreed with Dietrich: the huntsmen had probably snitched on our location. They'd acted perfectly natural when speaking to us, so I suspected that they'd been stopped by our pursuers for questioning afterward, on their way home.

We had a foreign zentaur and three whole horses for our tiny party: this was not a composition someone would run into twice. Asking around had probably been a cakewalk—I doubted they even needed a description of our likenesses.

Equipped with the information they'd gotten out of the hunting party, our enemies seemed to have decided that chasing us around the woods was a needless endeavor. Instead, they were slowly restricting our options until we were in the palm of their hand.

"I dunno if they're good at this or not," Dietrich said, "but man, do they have a ton of people. Every squad we've spotted had at least four. What kinda assassins work in droves like this?"

"Come to think of it..."

I hadn't noticed until now, but they did seem to have more people than they should've. All the squads had indeed been composed of four or more, and they'd been fully kitted out to boot. My experience facing nobles' pet armies armed to the teeth with the best money could buy had made me numb to a more sensible estimate of strength.

Did this mean that the Wiesenmuhles had abandoned secrecy? A house of the Thirteen Knights was sure to have more than a dozen subsidiary knighthoods under its wing, each with at least twenty trained soldiers ready to deploy. If

they were willing to bring all their own forces into the scandal, then they could mobilize hundreds of people to put together a massive manhunt...but that was a big if.

Knight households weren't just responsible for keeping a standing reserve of troops in case an emergency struck: they were magistrates in their own rights, obligated to keep the peace with their own forces. No matter how important the first princess of the main branch was, she wasn't going to prompt an all-out response.

At most, they could probably send out about a hundred people—calling commoners to arms wasn't feasible without a good excuse—which, judging from the scope of the encirclement, didn't add up. They'd need much more manpower to pull off something of this scale.

On top of that, they'd made their move with curious alacrity. Setting the initial ambush on the main road aside, it was impossible to put together a force of this size in less than ten days, Thirteen Knights or otherwise. The only authorities capable of throwing together this many people in a slapdash expedition were the aristocrats at the top of the social ladder who oversaw massive territories and kept four digits worth of people in their standing armies.

Had Sir Wiesenmuhle begged his lord for help? Would a knight of his stature risk losing that much face just to save one daughter? Honestly, looking at how obviously spoiled the girl was, I couldn't rule that possibility out.

"What's the move?" Dietrich asked. "Wanna give up on the bridge and bust open the net somewhere else? We could try another route."

"No, that's not happening. They're all coordinating together, so they'll be able to read our next move based on where we break through in their formation. Besides, we don't have any way of knowing for sure that they don't have a second or third layer, and we'll be cooked if they pin us against the river."

Our best bet was to gun it for the bridge. They'd probably blockaded it, but if we could get past that, any victory in battle would be a substantial one. Assuming we could destroy the bridge behind us—as big of a pain as that would be to the poor local workers—we'd be able to leave our pursuers in the dust as we raced to Innenstadt. That way, the pair would be safer after reaching the

city too.

The one silver lining was that the enemy didn't have a skilled magus on their side. If they'd been able to trace Miss Helena's existential signature with pinpoint accuracy, we would've been drowning in a sea of blood and combat by now; if they'd brought out a *professor*, we might as well lie down and surrender. Hell, even a noncombatant oikodomurge could probably box us in with a few layers of walls too tall to climb and put us into checkmate.

Still, I couldn't shake the question: how had they mobilized so many troops in such little time?

We turned in for the night in order to save as much energy for the big day as we could, forgoing a fire to stay concealed. Alas, Miss Helena was finally succumbing to the frigid winter, and her irregular coughs kept waking me up throughout the night.

Awaking on meager rest thanks to both the stress and cold, we saddled up for the decisive showdown. I rode Castor while Rudolf manned Polydeukes; the one that had been pulling the carriage was refitted as a packhorse to carry all the saddlebags. If worse came to worst, we'd leave the luggage and hurry ahead.

Abandoning all the gear I'd prepared for my future would be painful, but nothing I owned could buy me back my life. If nothing else, I had enough funds to rebuild if I lost it all.

"My lady, please let me know if there's anything I can do."

"Ack," she coughed. "I'm sorry, Rudolf. But fret not, I'll be fine. The tea Erwin gave me helped a little."

Miss Helena was with Rudolf. Part of it was because a lady without proper riding gear would struggle to straddle a horse, but the main reason was that she'd finally broken out into a light fever.

I'd brewed some elderflower and chamomile teas in preparation—they were thankfully mainstays in my pipe box—but she wouldn't truly begin to recover until she could rest easy in a warm environment. We needed to get her to Innenstadt as soon as possible. I wasn't about to fight my way through an enemy barricade just to have the damsel in distress die of pneumonia.

Knowing that we were surrounded, we abandoned the tricky, winding pathfinding we'd been employing before and headed straight to the location of the bridge—when suddenly, a piercing noise cut through the forest. Like the shrill ripping of cloth amplified tenfold, a whistling arrow zipped through the air.

This was no ceremonial arrow designed for a sustained, flutelike cry; it was the penetrating sound of a military instrument meant to be heard over the cacophony of war. It could only mean one thing: their target was here, and they wanted the whole forest to know it.

"Already?!" I shouted. "Dammit, run! Full speed ahead!"

Being found as soon as we gave up on hiding was nothing but bad luck. I kicked Castor's sides and brought him into a gallop; a beat later, Rudolf did the same for Polydeukes and pulled the packhorse along by the rein.

"The rear's all yours!"

"You betcha! This is just what a zentaur's made for!"

Leaving our backside to Dietrich, we took a linear formation and sprinted through the woods. The weighty clap of a bowstring rang out behind me, and then the devastating sound of splitting wood echoed from farther out.

"Tch, how clever of them. They're hiding behind cover at a distance! None of them look like they're approaching!"

"Looks like they're not pushing their luck... They're well trained," I grumbled. "That's fine—focus on maintaining speed! We're going to use the roads!"

Instead of taking the initiative to approach, our enemies hid behind cover in positions that restricted our ability to break through their ranks. Dodging trees in the forest, then, was wasted effort; I steered our party onto a small dirt path we'd discovered a few days prior.

"Whoa?! That was close!"

Just before I was about to break through a perfectly horse-sized opening in the foliage, a bad feeling gripped my mind. Letting instinct take the helm, I fired a crossbow bolt into the root of a nearby tree; a pressure-sensitive trap sprung, raising a taut rope into the air. Had I kept going unaware, Castor's back legs

would've been totally tangled.

Leaping over the obstacle, I brought down Schutzwolfe to clear the path for the rest of the party. They'd likely set up similar snares all across the forest—these workaholics must've been up all night preparing for us.

I slipped past three more traps, cursing our lack of a dedicated scout with each one. One was a simple rope like the first, but the other two were pitfalls; though they were certainly dangerous, none were sinister enough to lead to immediate death. Just as our condition for failure was the loss of Miss Helena, so too was her safety a sticking point for the enemy. That was no doubt the reason their traps were sparse and nonlethal. Personally, I wouldn't have minded if they kept this softhearted approach up.

"We're about to hit the road! Watch out for arrows!"

Finally past all the traps, we made our way onto the dirt path—cavalry promptly leapt out of the shrubbery on the other side. They knew we'd use this road and had been lying in wait for us.

The horsemen ran after us, firing another whistling arrow into the air: this time, they shot three of them, each a few beats after the last. Mixing into the clamor of hoofbeats, the arrows further sullied the crisp serenity of the pale blue skies.

Those arrows were some kind of code. Having a handful of canned plans that could be enacted based on the timing and type of whistling arrows was standard practice—wait. It was only standard practice for *military* personnel: were these *actually* Wiesenmuhle knights?!

"No way! It bounced off?!" Turning back at Dietrich's incredulous cry, I saw that someone had, indeed, managed to take a shot from her cannon of a bow and survive.

Five horsemen were hot on our tail. All of the horses were covered in majestic armor, and the riders each boasted a full set of their own. Yet despite the gleaming splendor of their equipment, it was very practical: I could make out enchantments and blessings woven into the metal.

The vanguard who'd taken Dietrich's arrow was equipped with a lance and

greatshield. His shield had been warped out of shape, his balance was out of sorts, and he looked to be in awful pain—I suspected he'd dislocated his shoulder. He began moving to cede his frontward position, but that he'd survived a shot from Dietrich at this range at all proved he was a formidable adversary.

"No, no, no, *what*?!" I shouted. "What the hell is this?! Why the hell is a real heavy knight out here?!"

"My arrow... They have some real fancy gear!"

"I can *see* that! A normal shield would've crumpled like paper—or, what? You don't expect me to believe you can't pierce a half-assed shield, do you?!"

"Of course I can! I've shot straight through a shield, armor, and person all at once before!"

That is not *an image I wanted in my head right now!*

Back to the point, it was apparent that their lavish, uniformly designed armor was built with high-quality metal and further bolstered via mystic or divine means; I refused to accept that some random schmuck could get their hands on equipment that turned a one-hit kill into a mere popped shoulder socket. Shields were ultimately expendable wares, and that theirs were evidently more protective than entire sets of regular armor spoke to their deep pockets.

"Shit!" Dietrich cursed. "Go! Down! Arrrgh, just die already!"

Indescribable sounds of banging metal kept ringing out behind me, but the number of pursuers failed to change no matter how many times I turned to check. Every time Dietrich nocked another arrow, they scrambled their movement to divert her aim such that they could deflect the shot with angled shields. Although every hit put a deep dent into the metal sheets, they were sturdy enough to protect the cavalrymen wielding them.

"Ugh, I can't get through! They move around to use their shields even when I aim for the horses! I hate fighting imperial knights like this!"

Veterans of the Second Eastern Conquest had endured the onslaught of countless horse archers; it was only natural that those who survived would be masters of counterplay. From the invention of barbed wire to the adoption of

specialized strategies, the modern Empire was a nation with a monomaniacal fixation on crushing light cavalry.

"That's fine, just keep shooting! Don't let them gain an inch!"

Barking my orders, I dug into Castor to pick up the pace. Reinforcements had followed the sound of the arrows, and they were beginning to arrive—both at our sides and in front of us. I parried spears, trampled foes, cut down the infantry in our way, and shot down the snipers in the trees. What was this, a bullet hell?!

"Wha—there's *more*?!" Judging from Dietrich's hollering, it seemed the rear flank had received backup too. Glancing over my shoulder, I counted fifteen riders chasing us. "You've gotta be kidding! This isn't normal, is it?!"

"Of *course* it's not normal! The God of Trials has it out for us!"

Overwhelmed by the stunning number of foes, Rudolf had lost the gift of speech; meanwhile, the only thing Dietrich and I had shouted in the past few minutes was earsplitting complaints.

Among the heavy cavalry were knights in majestic, gold-trimmed armor—the kind that just screamed, "I'm a boss enemy!"—just casually mixed into the crowd. The GM's extravagant ill will was so palpable today that it sent a cold sweat running down my back.

You have infinite resources. We players do not. You're supposed to dish out a challenge with that in mind, remember?!

Not only did they have a bunch of commanders, but there were so many unnamed mobs that I couldn't get to the big guys. Dietrich's powerful covering fire was keeping them at bay behind us and I was poking holes in the fence of spears to slip through up front; still, we were teetering on a razor-thin edge.

By my estimate, I wouldn't be able to break completely through their ranks even with my arcane arsenal. Those fancy sets of armor would obviously be packed with magic resistance, and heat was one of the most basic things any enchanted gear protected against.

I'd seen it myself. After the masked nobleman had ravaged my equipment, Lady Franziska had been kind enough to introduce me to a well-respected smith

in town. There, they'd happened to have a nearly finished set of armor out on display, and I'd been so enamored that I'd asked all kinds of questions about it. According to the smith, it could endure molten steel without so much as charring.

Mystic thermite and arcane napalm were unlikely to faze them unless I could land a direct hit. Not to mention the fact that many such armors were enchanted to shrug off projectiles; I wasn't even totally sure whether the darts would stick.

My magical flashbangs would probably be effective, but using them to buy time was a bit of a waste. I only had so many, and they wouldn't do me any good if the grunts kept us enclosed for long enough for the heavy hitters to recover.

I'll save my spells for when I charge headfirst into the fray. A parlor trick caught on to attracts no crowds—the lesson finally hit home.

"All right, the end's in sight!"

The swarm may have been slowly closing in on us, but we were finally approaching the edge of the forest. Past the final opening, I could see a bridge just barely wide enough for a carriage built over the currents of a large river.

But between us and it were a handful of knights, lined up with spears at the ready; we had more horsemen on our tail than ever, with light cavalry mixing in, ready to close the distance. Things were looking dire...

Oh, all right, all right. This was a bit too showy for my tastes, but the situation called for a flashy solution.

"Dietrich, come up front!"

"What?! Who's gonna hold the rear?!"

"Just come!"

"Ah, fine—*fine*!"

Firing three simultaneous arrows in a last-second volley, Dietrich managed to make the enemy vanguard stumble, thus slowing down the whole procession by fractions of a second. Then she sprinted to the front at full speed.

“I’m leaving Castor to you!”

“Wha—wait! They’ve got spears at the ready!”

“And I’m about to break their formation! Trust me and go straight!”

We broke free from the foliage. With the bridge just seconds away, I unlocked all my shackles.

An Unseen Hand zoomed right into the linemen’s faces with a flashbang catalyst at the ready. Out of nowhere, they were assaulted with the radiance of the midday sun and the roar of a jet engine. Unable to see and jostled by the deafening noise, the foot soldiers inevitably crumbled.

“I’ll leave the rest to you! Don’t worry, I won’t let a single one of them through!”

“Erich?!”

After we stampeded over the dazed spearmen, I leapt off my saddle and onto the thin railing near the mouth of the bridge. Dietrich would get her scolding for using my real name later; for now, I was just proud that she hadn’t slowed down in hesitation.

Polydeukes flew by, with Rudolf still atop and Miss Helena in his arms; then came the poor packhorse, frothing at the mouth in exhaustion. Had the bridge been any farther out, we would’ve had to leave the poor thing in the dust.

Upon seeing everyone to safety, I stuck one dart of precious thermite into each of the bridge’s piers. The reliable foundation braving the river’s currents went up in flames, and the ropes and planks holding the pillars together burned with it. The trusty bridge’s long tenure came to an abrupt end as almost half the bridge fell into the water below. A good horse or a demihuman with strong legs could still clear the opening with a running start, but I didn’t intend to give anyone that luxury.

Three foot soldiers who’d been outside the flashbang’s range ran toward me, and I cut them down in an instant. Flicking the blood off my blade, I marked a line in the dirt and shouted, “I shall cut down any who dare cross this line!”

The rest of their forces came barreling out from the forest but had to stop to

not trample their allies, still reeling on the ground from the light and sound.

Now the real battle could begin. I literally had my back to a wall—technically a river—but, well, I was of a mind to see what they'd got. No matter how many there were, I doubted they'd be as well coordinated as the Berylinian city guard; they couldn't even compare to the masked magus of the sewer, that freak monster at the Liplar viscounty, or Lady Agrippina.

"Take another step," I declared, raising Schutzwolfe, "and I'll test whether the God of Trials has given you His favor!"

"Don't stop!" a voice barked from the back of the crowd. "A lone swordsman cannot match our valor! The God of Trials shall only weep if you balk at the presence of an enemy!"

"Yes sir!" they all shouted.

"Fear not for your lives! Our lives shine brightest with the glimmer of a spearhead!"

The man's orders roused the shirking soldiers, and they quickly regrouped in proper formation. Archers climbed into trees, infantry stepped up with their spears, and the back line readied their swords in preparation for a melee.

I was impressed: they quickly positioned themselves in a way that would leverage their numerical advantage against a strong singular foe. Specifically, their arrangement was tailored against mercenary zweihander tactics; swinging wide to cover space was standard in a one-on-many, and they were ready to stifle the style.

The commander's voice sounded young, but had a dependable timbre and carried across the battlefield well. He called for his men to rise to the occasion with a lofty speech that betrayed a distinctly privileged background.

Every little detail only worsened my suspicions, but it was too late to settle things with words. The ring dangling on my necklace had missed its opportunity to shine.

All that remained was to carve out a happy ending with the tip of my blade.

Filed in a horizontal line, the spearmen synced their breathing; a volley of

arrows rained forth from their backs, and they charged alongside the covering fire.

Reading that they'd take the opportunity to shoot, I sprinted forward to dodge the brunt of the projectiles, only using my shield to block the few that would have hit. From there, I wormed my way in between the infantry's ranks. I swatted away spears on the left with my shield and redirected thrusts on my right with my sword; the ones sweeping my legs got stamped into the ground, and the ones swinging overhead rolled off the round parts of my armor and helm.

One man on my left tried to whack me on the head as hard as he could, but I'd seen it coming. Catching the hit with an Unseen Hand, I slowed his weapon down to the point where it barely patted my helmet. I bet he was utterly confused: his all-out swing had turned into a love tap for no discernible reason.

Navigating through a sideways storm of polearms, I cut spears by the handle to make myself space and close distances. A sword swiped at me from behind the first line of spearmen, and I wrenched it away with Schutzwolfe's handle guard; at the same time, I was pushing another man's face in with the edge of my shield.

With a little room to work with, it was time to let loose like a tornado. I ripped through the rabble, severing limbs, slashing faces, and bashing people unconscious. Any attack that came my way was invariably stopped by my sword, my shield, or one of their own friends. With no other option, I simply unleashed the whole of my martial skill on the men standing in my way.

"What's the matter?!" I roared. "I might as well be fighting stray mutts if all you're gonna do is stand there and die!"

The provocation was more to psych myself up than to berate them. Jumping into a sea of enemies with a body as squishy as mine was undeniably scary, and while I'd grown used to conquering my fear, it was important to stimulate myself where I could.

Lose sight of fear and you die; let it swallow you and you die. To win, you have to tame it—turn it into both armor and bridle.

Sir Lambert's words echoed in the depths of my mind as I swung my sword as

I'd practiced thousands of times. Each strike thinned the enemy horde, nourishing the earth at my feet in ever-darkening shades of red.

Fighting in close quarters, I began half-swording, slamming the handle or tip of my blade into whoever was in range to take it; throwing in elbows and shield bashes, I ran amok in the enemy formation. Those who lost their balance were mercilessly stomped on; those who fell on their rears got a kick to the jaw; those who went flying always did so right into their own comrades.

My top priority was to quickly dispatch anyone who approached, not to deliver a finishing blow. Despite how flashy I was being, I doubted I'd actually killed anyone yet; for all the eyes I'd crushed and arms I'd broken, the growing number of groans mixing into the constant screams proved most were still alive.

"H-He's a devil!"

"A demon—he's a sword demon! An ogre in mensch skin!"

As I spilled enough blood to drench me from head to toe, the proud army's will to fight started to fall apart. My horrific appearance and the pained moans of their friends caused the ones still standing to let up on their torrential offensive.

With the melee settling down, the archers mercilessly made use of the newly opened lines of sight. I swatted away one arrow and blocked another with a hapless infantryman yet to flee—it sank straight into his thigh with a painful squelch—only for the cavalry to take their turn and charge.

Both the light and heavy knights linked up in formation, running at me in a line. Their lances were far longer than the smaller spears of the foot soldiers who'd swatted at us in the forest, and their speed would make it incredibly difficult to dodge.

I guess it's time to pull out the trump card.

"Whoa!"

"What the?!"

"Augh!"

Deciding that my moment had come, I put my plan into action. Embiggened

by the Giant's Palm add-on, a fleet of Hands grabbed the many spears lying on the ground; slotting each into the groove between invisible fingers, I summoned an impromptu phalanx in the blink of an eye.

Every kid has pretended to be a comic-book hero or a needle-throwing assassin with pencils sticking out of a fist before—this was that, but with real spears. Each of my six Hands had four polearms, for a total of twenty-four. Digging the other ends into the ground for leverage, I'd built myself a fort of blades.

Packed tighter than any manned line of spears could be, my defenses skewered one knight after another. Some horses tripped and crashed over the makeshift fence, while others came to a screeching halt, throwing their jockey onto the ground. The vanguard was stuck, bringing all those behind them to a screeching halt; without their speed, the cavalry were just extra large targets.

Since I could only make crude maneuvers with the balled fists, I shrank my Hands back to regular size and equipped each with a single spear to precisely knock the remaining riders off their steeds.

One of my Hands got the honor of holding Schutzwolfe as I uttered *her* cursed name.

"You're up."

Space neither tore nor split: the Craving Blade appeared in my hands without any forewarning, singing her discordant song of love.

She'd been nagging me for a while now, saying that if I was going to frolic on such a blood-soaked stage, why did it have to be with the wolf's fang? That old sword would grow dull no matter how perfect my technique was; I was better off using her instead.

You sure are possessive, for a sword. As much as I would've liked to keep this secret weapon a secret, I took the cursed blade in hand and ran in to terrorize the knights before they could regain their footing.

"What the hell happ—argh?!"

The Craving Blade had shrunk to Schutzwolfe's size to make space for my shield—though I'd been told this form vexed her—and I thrust the one-handed

sword straight into a fallen knight's armpit to get around his armor.

One down... Or so I'd thought, but the man struggled through the pain and tried to grab me with his other arm. Left with no choice, I swung hard into his helmet to knock him out. I couldn't do this sort of thing with my dad's trusty blade out of fear it'd bend, so I had to hand it to the Craving Blade for her unyielding durability.

Robbed of their mounts, the knights rose and unsheathed their swords; even those who'd managed to keep their steeds around recognized that the opportunity to charge had passed and stepped down to join the fight.

Damn, their motivation is sky-high. My whole plan had been to chop up a few dozen guys until the rest of them got too scared to go on, but they weren't showing even the slightest signs of retreating.

The main general didn't seem to mind having his precious troops torn to shreds either. Those who could still fight regrouped around him, and he was still issuing commands left and right; judging from his demeanor, it looked like even more reinforcements were on the way. How many hundreds of people had they roped into this wild goose chase?

That a noble family had thrown all pride out the window to hunt us down terrified me. But what freaked me out even more was that he didn't seem like he was doing this out of some misguided need to save face after being whooped by a single enemy. I sensed a purer pride on the line: the will to win, no matter what it took.

In which case, I guessed there was only one path forward: take the big boss's head. These weren't random crooks who'd scatter as soon as I took out their commander; I'd still have to fight off his more loyal retainers out for vengeance. Still, it beat having to fight every single one of them to the last.

Plus, put in TRPG terms, that general gave some kind of AoE buff to his allies. So long as he was around, his subordinates would shrug off morale checks until the cows came home. While it was risky to ignore adds and aim straight for the boss, I had to eliminate him before I lost the war of attrition.

Ugh, this is why I hate fighting hordes!

I clashed swords with a charging knight, and something *unthinkable* happened.

“What?! M-My ancestral heirloom!”

My Hybrid Sword Arts were Divine, and my Dexterity was the product of Divine Favor. Doubling up on my strongest stat with Enchanting Artistry, I could cut through a random schmuck and their weapon both with a half-hearted swing. This time I was serious, and I’d paired my attack with the *Craving Blade*...yet my sword had gotten stuck only a third of the way through my opponent’s blade!

Looking closer, I noticed that the knight’s sword had arcane engravings on its hilt that were faintly glowing as they unleashed their power. Enchanting equipment with written words wasn’t particularly complicated as far as magecraft went, but the mana flowing out from within was ancient. Packed with magically enhanced sharpness, durability, rigidity, and more, it was decked out with an expensive set of bells and whistles.

This man was wielding a mystic blade! Unlike the Craving Blade, it was man-made and *expensive*. Tabletop gamers were prone to seeing enchanted weapons as merely something to set apart novice dungeon divers from tested adventurers, but they were priceless in this world. A good mystic blade was almost never taken into public as an everyday carry, and to craft a new one took a master bladesmith and mage working in tandem.

The words “ancestral heirloom” had slipped out of the man’s mouth; pair that with all of their lavish armor, and it was painfully apparent that these were no ordinary knights. Whose bad side had we gotten on? If they hailed from the barony that had started this whole debacle, though, then only the head of household’s bodyguards would have this kind of gear. Something didn’t add up...

Yet that could wait. As magnificent as the sword was, I wouldn’t go easy on a foe in battle. Putting my waist into it, I snapped the rest of the blade off.

“What’s the matter?” I jeered. “Go on, choose. Is your pride worth losing your family treasure?”

The other knights at the ready stirred faintly. Upon closer inspection, they too

had a glorious set of weaponry: mystic swords, divine swords, and simply masterful works of smithing adorned their hands. Though none of them laid down their arms, I could tell they'd thought about what might happen next.

Nobody wanted to be remembered for losing a precious relic passed down for generations. If they did, victory wouldn't be enough to avoid a trial by relatives; at worst, they could lose their spot at the top of their respective families.

That they retained their stances and continued watching for a chance to strike spoke volumes to their loyalty and dignity as fighters. Even the worst-case scenario had only given them a moment's pause.

What a pain. How was I going to break past them, and then past the final cluster of foot soldiers guarding the general?

I'd confirmed in close quarters that their armor had blessings preventing blindness and deafness. Battlefields were full of mudslinging, and the wind and rain relentlessly pelted the eyes, especially on horseback; meanwhile, cannons and large-scale spells were a constant threat to soldiers' ears. I'd been looking to hire a priest to do the same for me one day, so I knew divine protection existed. So long as they fit into whatever jurisdiction the god in question presided over, my remaining two flashbang catalysts weren't going to help.

I had two sticks of thermite remaining, which I was saving for an enemy I couldn't cut down. I also had one package of napalm, but I couldn't use it to clear the small fry without blocking my own path forward. Lastly, I couldn't justify using the Daisy Petal spell, given the radius. While I'd improved the containment barrier from the last time I'd used it, I still wasn't broken enough to make it so that I could shrug off the effects if I was close by.

Looks like I'll have to grit my teeth and do this the old-fashioned way.

Or so I'd thought: out of the blue, a terrifying presence came barreling toward me from behind. It took me a second to react, because the bloodlust coming my way wasn't directed at me; an arrow split the air just to my left—zooming toward the knights, crumpling the breastplate of a heavily armored man and sending him flying into the background.

"What the hell was that?!"

“Look! The other one doubled back!”

Indeed, the arrow had come from the zentaur galloping across the remaining parts of the bridge: Dietrich had returned.

“I thought I told that idiot to go on ahead!”

She fired off three more shots in quick succession to subdue the archers in the trees, and then sprinted at full speed. Kicking off with enough force to crack the planks underhoof, the fully armored zentaur’s sprint further worsened the stability of what foundation remained; the whole bridge began to sway, unable to fight the flow of the river.

“Yeeeaaargh!”

With one final step, she delivered the bridge its last rites; yet its sacrifice begot a beautiful jump worthy of being immortalized on canvas. Her short gray hair shone brightly under the blue sky, and her underside glowed from the surface glimmer of the river below.

Despite her hulking equine frame, she stuck a graceful landing. She cracked the plank she landed on, but didn’t snap it in half, letting her reach this side of the shore. Taking the greataxe off her back with her left hand, she extended her right arm toward me.

“Hop on!”

I instinctively grabbed her hand. Unlike when I climbed onto the Dioscuri, there wasn’t a stirrup to rest my weight on. I let go of one spear and used a Hand to boost myself up, with Dietrich pulling me to get me the rest of the way there. As hard as it was to seat myself without a saddle, she was doing a good enough job of not bouncing up and down that I didn’t have to worry about falling off.

“Are you sure about this?!”

Although I’d taken the ride in the spur of the moment, I had to ask. A zentaur’s back was a holy place: I couldn’t even count the number of times Dietrich had grumbled about her tutelary spirit when she had to lug around her own stuff.

“How can I call myself a real warrior if I leave you here and run?! I wanna be the best—and the best doesn’t run from a fight!”

As she curved wide left in order to sidestep the enemy, Dietrich turned back to look at me. Amidst the ferocity in her expression was a distinct glow of pride: she was no longer the bum she’d been when we first met. Her smile was that of someone who’d remembered what it means to chase the pinnacle of her craft—she was a hero-to-be.

“Yeah... Yeah! Looking cooler than ever, Dietrich!”

“Then let’s finish this off in style! Where’re we headed?!”

“The general! Go for the guy in the fanciest armor!”

“Roger that! Oh, and don’t you fall off on me! I’ve never done this before, so I dunno how to hold back for a passenger!”

Following orders to a tee, she ran straight past the knights that had surrounded me in a loose semicircle. Just to make sure they couldn’t give chase, I left a package of arcane napalm in our tracks; even if we made it to the commander, we’d struggle if a group of strong knights came in to surround us.

“Hold up, you’re a mage?!”

“Something like that!”

“Tell me sooner! That’s *so* unfair! How come you’re good with a sword *and* magic?!”

“Look, I’ve got my own stuff going on, okay?!”

Despite her complaints, Dietrich ran straight toward the chief knight. Though he wasn’t far, the distance was exacerbated by our having to fight our way through goons. Now, more than ever, I felt guilty for having questioned five-to ten-second rounds of combat in TRPGs as too long.

“Men, to your positions! Hold your ground!”

“Yes, sir!”

The dozens of infantry who’d stayed out of the knights’ way quickly rallied into another wall of spears. Tightly packed, they became a prickly mountain without a single hole in sight. They’d posted up at the mouth of the forest and completely blockaded the opening: our two options were to slow down and slip into the foliage or take the fight straight into their arms.

“That’s...a bit scary! Not that it’s enough to make a Hildebrand warrior flinch, though!”

“Just charge straight in! I’ll break them up!”

Right beside the general, a mounted priest in lavish armor began to pray.

Knowing I had to act fast, I tossed a Handful of flashbang toward the phalanx. Seventy-five thousand candelas burnt the foot soldiers' eyes once more; the priest's petition for an Arrow Ward came in just too late.

An Arrow Ward was a catchall miracle that deflected projectiles. Little packets of arcane catalysts were well within its scope, so I was glad I'd tossed my flashbang in time. I suspected the priest had waited until the last second because he didn't have any other fellow holy men to extend the divine protection's duration if it ran out too soon.

I respected the decision. In our current situation, the only thing we could seemingly do was chuck spears from afar or have Dietrich switch back to her bow. Choosing to cut off our access to projectiles when our only other choice was to get skewered on a human-size pincushion was smart.

However, he'd acted too late. He should've activated the miracle as soon as we ran past the knights. I didn't know if he was scared of whatever price his god would demand for Their services, but the best play in these scenarios was always to respect your opponents and go all out from the beginning.

A warm breeze lapped at us as we zoomed past the groveling infantry. Arrow Wards were winds which robbed projectiles of their momentum and sent them off in completely different directions, but they had no effect on something the size of a horse; if they did, the front line holding ground would've been swept away too.

"Wow, this is great! If this is a magic tool, you've gotta sell me one! I bet I'd make a killing if I ran around using this back up north!"

"Not the time! Something's coming!"

The enemy commander's unit had slowly been backing up this whole while. Though the light cavalry leading the VIP procession had been hit with residual light and sound, the five or so people next to the chief were clad in debuff-blocking armor.

To make matters worse, they'd been hiding an ace up their sleeve: a giant fireball came soaring toward us.

Fire was as primitive as it was violent; almost none of the sentient races could

resist its destruction. Shooting it at an enemy was perhaps the most basic option in all offensive spellcasting.

I'd figured they'd have a mage. They were no magus, but having a lethal attack was enough to be a real threat. They didn't match up to me, let alone come remotely close to Mika—part of the spell was propped up on hedge magic instead of true magic—but running into this now, of all times, was a conundrum.

My flashy one-on-many approach had burned up most of my mana reserves, and I didn't have the chops to erase someone else's magic on an empty tank. Hold on, this was bad: if Dietrich didn't dodge this, we were going to be a charred dinner.

"Hmph, that's all you got?!"

Yet the dauntless zentaur did not dodge: she simply ran straight into the path of flames. Before I could even ask what the hell she thought she was doing, the fireball scattered as if it had crashed into an invisible wall.

"The village shaman blessed every scale to protect me! Everyone knows nothing ruins a fun fight like half-assed magic!"

Out of nowhere, an antimagic blessing had activated. Looking closely, I saw that each tiny plate of her scale armor was imbued with some archipelagic rune. Glowing in faint red writing, there was one for projectiles, poison, and all sorts of other things—including magic. Deep and fervent prayer had gone into every single one.

What terrific defense! Any spell woven together by an amateur and targeted at the wearer would be caught by the keepers of reality early, and its effects would wither away.

With gear like this, it was no wonder the knights stationed on the Empire's northern front feared the housecarls of the polar islands. They refuted magic at its very foundation, preferring to beat their foes to death with more primitive means. History-book authors claimed that the Empire refused to set out against them despite hundreds of years of bad blood, and not only for the nonexistent Rhinian navy—I could very much see why!

“Graaaaaagh! Get outta my waaay!”

A horrific noise perhaps best described as a *gathunk* echoed out as a heavy knight went flying. Dietrich’s full swing had sent the full-grown armored soldier packing like a rag doll. His neck bent at inhuman angles, and his enchanted, blessed armor split wide open; even his horse staggered after the blow.

Strength really, truly did solve just about any problem.

“Sir, please retreat! Leave us and regroup afterward!”

“But then you lot will—”

“Please, just go!”

The final few blocked the path as we tried to advance toward the chief knight. They moved in to block Dietrich from the front and to swing for her comparatively open back—but we tore straight through them.

The knight obstructing our path with a massive halberd in hand was crushed under the freakish might of Dietrich’s overhead swing. The two who’d come in for our flanks were cut down by the Craving Blade in her full two-handed glory.

“That armor sure looks heavy!”

The priest tried to strike with a spiked club—*Hey, it’s Lord Mace! Hi, Lord Mace!*—and the mage tried weaving another fireball, but to no avail. We trampled over them both and rushed down the man in charge.

“No matter what you do,” I shouted, “don’t kill him! No matter what!”

“Seriously?! That’s such a pain...”

“Then don’t touch him—you can’t hold back with your weapon anyway! Get me up next to him!”

“Fine, I get it! Just don’t kick me, okay?! I bet that hurts!”

Unlike when I rode my trusty steeds, I signaled Dietrich to accelerate by slightly squeezing with my legs. I’d already figured that digging a spur into her would hurt, since she wasn’t used to it, and it hadn’t taken me long to notice she was worried about it after mounting her.

Upon lining up with the final knight, I could tell that he was scowling even

through his helmet. *Like hell I'll let you regroup with more reinforcements.*

"You brutes!" he shouted.

"All your underlings are gone! Come on, aren't you going to avenge them?!"

"Grr, you bastards!"

I taunted the handsomely equipped knight so that he wouldn't focus solely on retreating, and managed to get him to pull out his sword. Overflowing with godly power, he swung at us immediately. As I'd surmised from the quality of his subordinates' gear, his weapon was particularly nice. I wasn't well versed enough in theology to know the extent of its blessings, but I could tell that, at minimum, the Sun God had consecrated it to banish evil and never so much as chip.

A worthy opponent. I, too, had an invulnerable sword, and I parried his with my own. The godly blade glowed with heavenly light, and my cursed sword cried out in anger.

Phew, that had me worried for a second. I'd feared that the two might cancel each other out and both shatter, or that the Father God's power might have a special bonus against my deeply heinous-looking sword.

But boy, was his weapon cool... In fact, it was so cool that I definitely would've looked like the villain to any third-party observer.

He tried to bat me off Dietrich's back or take down the zentaur herself, but I blocked every attempt and returned a flurry of counters. The impressive resistances of his doubly bolstered—both mystic and miraculous—defenses meant that the Craving Blade did not strike true, even with my skill. Still, I was at least scoring his armor.

If only he hadn't been so well equipped, I could've just yanked him off his horse by the collar with an Unseen Hand.

"Grgh! Ah! Why?! Why, God?! Why must You hand me such impossible trials?!"

The difficulties of fighting on horseback were largely mitigated thanks to Dietrich moving to match my balance. Reading which way I'd shift, she adjusted

her posture so that I could swing true even without a saddle or stirrups. I wasn't as stable as when I was on solid ground, of course, but she more than compensated for my meager Jockeying abilities.

Slowly but surely, I whittled the knight down until his movements began to dull. While I had to admit that he was skilled, he was clearly a better leader than fighter. As a benchmark, I wouldn't be able to fell him in one strike if he focused entirely on defending, but there was no universe in which he could kill me.

"God! Why must you rend me apart from the lovely Helena so?!"

...Excuse me?

I finally managed to Disarm him, and he lost his balance, tumbling off his horse with a sorrowful cry. But, whatever—that was fine. We won, his armor would probably keep him alive, blah, blah, blah.

Could we go back to what he'd just said?!

"Dietrich, turn around! Now! Hurry!"

"Wha—huh?! I can't stop on a dime like that! And quit shaking my shoulder!"

The unbelievable statement had me steering Dietrich around in a frenzy. The dismounted knight wobbled to his feet, throwing away his warped helmet in spite.

What he unveiled was a Prince Charming chiseled from white marble. His noble features were well defined, and the gentle waves of his golden hair sparkled even through the grime of battle. Two deep green eyes betrayed a sharp yet honest personality, though they currently burned with the will to keep fighting.

"Scoundrels! This isn't over! I shall defeat you and save Lady Helena! Come at me, cravens! I'll show you the honor of the Sternberg name!"

I scrambled off Dietrich's back and sidestepped the man's dazed attack, sweeping him off his feet. As he fell, I grabbed his right arm and got him right in the joints.

With that done, I—somewhat forcefully—pulled him to his feet.

"Excuse me," I said. "May I have a word?"

“I have no words for a filthy kidnapper! Take me as a hostage if you must—I will never give up! My life means nothing until the fair Helena rests in safety!”

Is it just me...or is our story really *not lining up?*

[Tips] Very few people can create enchanted swords on their own: a magus with deep interests in metallurgy might be able to, and ordained Metal God clergy specialized in sword-making may choose to add blessings during the smithing process. As such, the prices for such weapons are astronomical—the cheapest will still easily rival the price for a newly built mansion.

“...So you mean to tell me that this whole affair has been the product of a misunderstanding?”

“I swear it upon the name of my former master, Count Agrippina von Ubiorum.”

I found myself sitting on a camp stool within a hastily pitched tent, face-to-face with a pretty boy fit to lead in a shojo manga—one who was discontentedly scratching his head. Ignoble as the gesture was, I could sympathize: I’d be doing the same if I could get away with it.

This had been a misunderstanding of catastrophic proportions, and both sides had incurred losses too great to be written off as a joke. It hurt my brain just trying to figure out where to start unraveling.

Perhaps the logical first step was to introduce Sir Bertram von Sternberg: heir apparent to the Sternberg county, he currently led his own knighthood, pledging his allegiance to his own father. In his spare time, the dashing nineteen-year-old was preparing himself to take the reins of the county in due time.

After explaining the reality of the situation to the man, insisting that I wasn’t lying until he lost the breath to refute me, and begrudgingly pulling out my ace in the hole—how many times was I going to have to use this thing?—to prove my identity, he’d *finally* caved. Somehow managing to calm his yet-battle-hungry subordinates, Sir Bertram had called for an impromptu conference to set the story straight.

To begin, we had been working under false pretenses. Miss Helena had, indeed, been at the center of marriage talks, yet the groom-to-be was not the aging Baron Attendorn.

I'd held my share of suspicions about the arrangement, and sure enough, the whole affair was the product of a perfect storm of bad luck.

You see, Baron Attendorn was just the middleman: he had played the role of a particularly prestigious carrier pigeon in the dealings between one handsome Sir Bertram and the princess of House Wiesenmuhle. Miss Helena then jumped to conclusions after overhearing bits and pieces of the story, and her father put the final nail in the coffin by insisting upon keeping the proposal a secret to wow his daughter with a wonderful surprise—one, might I add, that no one had asked for.

The apple doesn't fall far from the tree, I guess. Engagements were up there with funerals and weddings proper for "events least fit to be sprung as a surprise." How, in the name of all that was or had ever been holy, could you possibly fumble a situation *this* simple to the point of causing dozens and dozens of bloody injuries?

"We thankfully haven't had any casualties, but just about everyone is gravely wounded." Sir Bertram spoke in a daze. "How much in church donations will it take to heal them all? How many houses will teeter on the cusp of ruin trying to reequip their men? I suppose I must ask father to help me petition for an iatrurge..."

It seemed that the soldiers' absurdly fancy gear had kept any of them from kicking the bucket, but quite a few of them were halfway to death—well, maybe a *little* more than halfway. Nearly as many had suffered damage to heirloom weapons or armor; the whole state of affairs was too atrocious to even laugh at.

In fact, if Sir Wiesenmuhle had popped out the bushes with a "Ta-dah!" and a prank'd sign, I think I would have killed him on the spot.

Jokes aside, the truth was that that very same Sir Wiesenmuhle had recognized how jumbled the situation had gotten and hatched the worst plan of all time to correct it. Seeing as the engagement was all but set in stone, he'd

decided to let Sir Bertram deliver the news himself in bombastic fashion—for presumably no other reason than the fact that it'd be entertaining. That was why the future count was in the area at all, accompanied by his finest men.

Alas, the damsel in distress had convinced herself she was eloping with her retainer, and the pair had no small number of accomplices. Sir Wiesenmuhle had panicked: at this rate, both he and his prospective new in-laws would be slapped in the face with a double serving of embarrassment. He sent out a few troops in a hurry, but in a sorry twist, they were driven off by a pair of bodyguards-for-hire. Realizing he wouldn't be able to handle this on his own, he bit the bullet and opened up to his contacts at House Sternberg...

And told them that his daughter had been *kidnapped*.

Sir Bertram had fallen in love with Miss Helena at first sight upon catching a glimpse at a Berylinian ball, and the thought that his beautiful fiancée might be hurt just as they were to be wed did not sit well with him. Rallying his men alongside an army on loan from Sir Wiesenmuhle, he'd thrown everything he had into this ludicrous game of tag.

I bet that would've made for a truly dramatic proposal, had things gone well. If only.

"My head... Oh, my head..."

You and me both. Mind if I take a break to go hurl?

"Who am I meant to blame? Sir Wiesenmuhle? Am I meant to condemn my own father-in-law?"

Well, uh...yeah. If anyone was to blame, it was certainly him. That the silver medal went to the fair Miss Helena made it hard to make any real comment.

"Perhaps," I warily said, "you may be able to use this as an ace in the hole in future dealings with your in-laws."

"No, I... I can't even do that. What would His Majesty say about *me* if word reached him?"

To shield the Emperor with their finest soldiers was a noble's duty; this episode was clearly an affront to that ideal. What self-respecting count could

admit that he decimated his own prized army over a series of events that would seem unbelievable in a theatrical comedy? Even if His Majesty let him off with a mere warning, the Sternberg name would be in shambles; it was easy to imagine them being unofficially cast away from high society.

Finally tightening up his expression with tragic resolution, Sir Bertram declared, “This never happened. I’ll make sure of it, even if I have to borrow Sir Wiesenmuhle’s hand to do so.”

“I believe that would be for the best,” I agreed.

The circumstances were unacceptable, but Houses Sternberg and Wiesenmuhle were too deeply intertwined to back out now. Baron Attendorn may not have been high enough in standing to take Miss Helena as a mistress, but he was more than influential enough to play the part of a mediator; with him involved, the engagement couldn’t simply be canceled on a whim.

That was why this event would produce no deaths, no injuries, and not even a single scratch on the knights’ gear. The Wiesenmuhle coffers would feel a little lighter, or perhaps their warehouses would seem a little more spacious, but they’d figure it out. They were an ancient family: I’m sure they could rifle through old spoils of war to produce a few divine blades to reequip their men.

“Sir Erich, may I ask a favor?”

“Worry not, I shall keep the matter to myself. You can expect no more than a letter congratulating your marriage from Her Excellency.”

That I still drew breath was a fatal thorn in his side. The only reason I was still alive was because I’d been fortunate enough to avoid any unsurvivable predicaments—that, and they simply didn’t have the strength to kill me.

At this range on solid ground, I could do Sir Bertram in at any moment. He’d stationed his men a little ways away, so I could annihilate the bulk of them in an instant with the Daisy Petals, and mopping up the rest would be child’s play. This disparity in power was the main thing preventing him from treating me as a witness that needed to be forcibly silenced.

Violence really, truly did solve just about any problem...huh. Déjà vu.

They also knew that I could use magic, and the risk that I might leak

information through some mysterious wizardry if they tried anything funny meant all they could do was pray I was telling the truth. After all, Sir Bertram's mage wasn't adept enough to counter that sort of spellcasting, if his fireball was anything to go off.

All my leverage combined left me sitting pretty despite the cold sweat running down my back.

"'Scuse me. I went and found them."

Just as the awkwardness of watching the future count despair at the task at hand was beginning to get uncomfortable, Dietrich returned...

"Excuse my entrance, Sir Bertram."

"Oh! Is it truly her?!"

...along with Rudolf, carrying a bundled up Miss Helena in his arms. I'd asked her to bring them back while I explained the situation. Luckily, the packhorse had given out shortly after clearing the bridge, and they'd apparently been pretty easy to track down.

"Wh-Who are you?"

"It is a pleasure to meet you, O fair Helena. My name is Bertram Eugen Lebol von Sternberg, and I am your fiancé."

"Huh? Fiancé? Mine?"

"That's right. I've come to take you home. Oh, you're bright red—you must've caught a cold. The weather must have been terribly hard on you." Turning his attention to Rudolf, he ordered, "You there, hand her to me."

"Yes, sir."

Helena was passed from one set of arms to another, and the sudden appearance of a handsome young man in her bleary line of sight had her dazed.

I couldn't blame her. Amidst a rapid turn of events, her addled mind was suddenly subjected to a real Prince Charming here to whisk her away. A princess packing as many flowers in her head as Miss Helena was sure to let the magical developments sink her into a dreamy stupor; the fever alone had her halfway there.

“Don’t worry, I shall call for a doctor at once. He may not be a specialist, but one of my men knows a little healing magic.”

“Oh... Um, thank you very much.”

The girl’s cheeks grew rosier than the product of sickness alone. Rudolf gazed on with great sadness, but also with a tinge of relief; he then attempted to back out of the tent.

“Ah, wait! Rudolf, what about you? You must be tired too...and you were so cold. Won’t you see the doctor with me?”

“No, my lady, you need not worry about me. I was not cold so much as you were feverish. I pray you to hurry to the physician and rest easy.”

The retainer politely pushed back the hand reaching out to him from the blanket cocoon and slipped out of the tent.

I bowed once to Sir Bertram and did the same, taking Dietrich with me. Seeing the reality of the situation and Rudolf’s expression had seemingly given her something to think about, and she quietly followed my lead.

The three of us walked a short distance away, hiding in a blind spot to evade the daggered glares of the soldiers preparing to leave. I found Castor and Polydeukes waiting for us there: they, too, could feel the bad atmosphere, and looked to be relieved when they saw me approaching.

“Well,” I sighed, “that’s that.”

“So... So you’re telling me the princess goes home and it’s ‘The End’? What? Are we really leaving it at that?”

Dietrich didn’t seem quite satisfied, and honestly, I was sharing the load. Still, I wasn’t about to wrap myself up in any more trouble than I already had. Worsening this scandal by turning into a *real* kidnapper wasn’t in my agenda.

“This is how it was meant to be. My lady will return home, and it seems she’s found herself a caring husband to take care of her. Isn’t this exactly what we all wanted?”

“But Rudolf!”

“Thank you, Miss Dietrich, but it’s fine—really. I even got to enjoy a fleeting

dream: be it just to carry her as it may, to hold her in my arms offered me a moment of bliss."

"But... Are you *really* okay with that?"

The zentaur squinted her eyes as if to ask the man whether he was giving up; the loyal servant shook his head as if to answer that there was nothing to give up on.

"The fairy tales end with the knight whisking away the princess in a Happily Ever After, but the truth is that it is that After which is the real challenge. The sheltered princess can't keep up with the knight's way of life; the lowly knight can't provide for the princess. That's why *this* is the real storybook ending."

And the two lived happily ever after—The End. A textbook ending, but it rarely conveyed the reality of an after-story. Had Miss Helena gone with Rudolf, the odds were good that she'd have grown sick of him during their ensuing life on the lam.

We were talking about a girl whose meals conveniently appeared before her and whose empty plates vanished without any effort on her part; others came to dress her when she wished to change clothes, and merchants visited her residence if she wished to shop. Even accompanied by a handful of servants, life in the countryside would be unbearable for her. Rudolf had said they'd swiped some gems and mystic tools to sell, but how long that could fund the Wiesenmuhle princess's patience was anyone's guess.

While Miss Helena had naively spoken about how she'd help provide via her needlework, she could only say that now because she knew nothing of true toil. Without expensive lotions or ointments, the skin on her hands would crack from the labor; would she still be able to hold her head high then?

"I'm content with the short-lived dream I was able to live. And my lady is now living her own: her dashing fiancé came to save her with breathtaking bravery."

"Rudolf..."

"Don't you think that's a happier ending for everyone?"

The poor luck carved into his expression hadn't changed from when we'd first met. Yet something in Rudolf's smile seemed refreshed, almost—as if he'd

unloaded a massive burden from his shoulders. It was odd to think that the burden in question was everything he'd built up in his life until now.

"But then where's *your* happy ending?" Dietrich said with a grimace. "...Ugh."

"You may be able to ask to be referred to Sir Bertram," I suggested.

The man shook his head. A servant who betrays his master's trust loses it forevermore, he said, and he further sighed that any employment with one of the affiliated parties would just see him take the fall for something sooner or later.

"I still have this," Rudolf said, patting the sword at his hip. "This, and the memory of a wonderful dream. That's more than enough to get along in this world. The crew waiting at Innenstadt are in the same boat. You know, maybe I'll invite them to join me as adventurers or wandering knights."

He smiled a lifeless smile. If nothing else, he wanted to see off the people he'd entangled without worrying us. Trying to put up a strong front, he pulled out his purse.

"Here is your reward. It isn't nearly enough for all you've done, but please take it as a token of my appreciation."

Taking the pouch in hand, I opened it to see what must have been all the money he and Miss Helena had prepared. A few gold coins were sprinkled amid a mountain of silver.

"I can't take this," I said, pushing it back into his hands. "We didn't finish your request: the job was to see Miss Helena to Innenstadt. In which case, you don't owe us anything."

"B-But—"

"Then don't mind if I do." Dietrich plucked the wallet out of Rudolf's hands before he could try and hand it to me again. "You need to get to Innenstadt either way, right? I don't wanna part ways here just to have them figure, 'Hey, while we're at it,' and try to keep you quiet. We two can handle ourselves if they do, but—no offense—I'm kinda worried about leaving you on your own."

"Are you sure?" Rudolf asked.

“Sure I’m sure. Besides, I’ve made my peace: I still don’t have what it takes to drag this little runt back home.” Playing with the weighty sack of coins, the zentaur warrior drooped her good ear and glared my way. “Can’t believe you were going *easy* on me. I’m still leagues away from being the kinda woman who can threaten your life, and, well, how am I supposed to get there if I stick around and let you take all the real fights for yourself?”

“I wasn’t holding back, per se,” I said with a shrug. “I just wasn’t going all out.”

Dietrich punched me in the shoulder for my cheeky excuse. I could’ve avoided it, but I’d let her have this one. Despite this being a product of my promise to the madam, I couldn’t deny that I’d hurt her pride as a fighter.

“Plus, Erich only helped ’cause I was so gung ho about it, so it’s my duty to see things through. That’s what being a cool warrior’s all about, right?”

“Yeah. I respect that, Dietrich.”

“Would it kill you to compliment me as a woman, at least at the end?”

Waving off the sulking zentaur, I pulled out a little pouch of my own and tossed it at Rudolf.

“Take it. Consider it a severance bonus.”

With a nice jingle, my winnings from the tournament a few towns back landed in his hands. I’d left it all in the original packaging because I hadn’t needed the money for anything, but this was a good chance to put it to use. A man and his friends setting off on their own could use all the help they could get.

“Wha—huh?! But this is—”

“Hey! No fair! You never lent *me* any money!”

That tiny pouch had five drachmae in it. With that, they’d be able to buy up the gear they needed and still have a few weeks’ worth of meals to spare. The rest was up to them and fate.

“Hold it, Rudolf! Gimme that! It’s too much for you!”

“Huh?! No, shouldn’t we be giving this *back*?!”

“Use part of that to buy Dietrich some new equipment, please. You can use the rest to buy a new horse for that carriage, if you’d like, but be careful: zentaur gear costs a lot. And make sure *you* hold the purse strings. Dietrich isn’t allowed to have any more than one silver piece at a time.”

I placed great emphasis on Rudolf controlling the finances. We were talking about the kind of fool who couldn’t even finish a shopping run without giving into the temptations of booze; who knew what kind of garbage she’d magic perfectly good gold coins into next?

The two of them squabbled over the bag for a bit until I whipped them into order. I forced the luckless man to accept the gift and stash it away, and made it very, very clear to the warrior that she was not to touch the money.

“All right,” I said, “it’s about time we head off.”

“Yep. Guess we gotta jump the bridge again...”

“Speaking of which, I’m impressed you were able to do that while carrying Miss Helena, Rudolf.”

“Oh, please, I’m no jockey. Your horse was just so impressive that it cleared the gap without any input on my part.”

Blind spot or otherwise, our chatter was sure to draw the attention of the vengeful soldiers eventually; we decided to head out before any of them could disobey their orders to cease fighting.

We hopped over the bridge and recovered the packhorse—it was looking a little better for wear now—and all the luggage it carried. Despite Dietrich’s grumbling that he ought to just take them for his loyal service, Rudolf insisted on leaving his lady’s belongings nearer to the bridge, so we doubled back a short ways, where he unloaded one of his saddlebags.

“That’s everything.”

Content that he’d accounted for all her belongings, the man clapped his hands free of dirt. It seemed to me that he shook off the last of his attachments with the dust, leaving everything packed in one abandoned saddlebag.

“Apologies for the wait,” he said. “Mr. Erich, are you...?”

“Getting home has always been my main goal, and I only took this request on the side. Stopping by Innenstadt would take me farther out from here—so it looks like this is where we part ways.”

This was supposed to be a way of making back some of the change I’d spent on the way home; what a detour it had become. Additionally, I’d ended up *losing* money in the process. I guess I was just a big softie.

But in order to not lose any more, I’d need to get home before the first snowfall.

“I guess so,” Dietrich said. “Well, you can relax and leave this guy to me.”

“Don’t cause him any trouble, okay? Keep the liquor to one libra a day. And don’t throw any tantrums just because you want snacks. Oh, and when you’re drinking on the road—”

“*I’m* taking care of *him*, dammit!”

Dietrich could huff and puff all she pleased, but when I asked her how many times she’d acted like a child on *our* journey, the fully grown zentaur turned away with a pout. She really needed to understand that my impression of her fiscal sense was that of a five-year-old in a candy aisle.

“Farewell,” I said at last. “I wish you the best, Dietrich, warrior of the Hildebrand tribe.”

“Yeah. See you again, Erich, warrior of Konigstuhl...and one of my heroes.”

I bumped my fist against hers, and she reached around for a hug—but not before I could block her incoming face with my hand. It was wedged between her lips and mine, and as she placed a kiss on my inner knuckles, so too did she place a grumpy gaze on me.

Hey, it was better than a flick to the forehead, right?

Truth be told, she *had* stolen my heart for a moment. When she’d finally awoken to what she truly wanted to be, and assumed the dignity and responsibility to pursue her ideals, she had been simply beautiful.

“Not quite.”

“Y’know, you could’ve given me *that* one.”

Slipping out of her arms, I jumped onto Polydeukes before she could say any more, taking off with Castor's reins in my hand.

"Oh, jeez! The next time we meet, I'll drag you back home kicking and screaming! I'll get so strong that you won't be able to lift a finger against me!"

"Sounds good! I'll be looking forward to it! Feel free to challenge me anytime!"

A warrior's goodbye must never be dreary.

Basking in the joy of seeing one of my own sprung back to life, I rode toward home. Every single episode we'd come across had been an absolute clusterfuck, but you know what? Looking back, it hadn't been all too bad.

[Tips] All's well that ends well—Happily Ever After. Fairy tales use this magical defense to dispel all doubt and ease all fear; yet what truly matters most is how the heroes prepare for whatever story may come after.

0.1 Hendersons

Henderson Scale 0.1

A derailing event that has no impact on the overarching story.

For example, a tangent might run too long, forcing the epilogue to be fleshed out over dinner, or on the walk home.

The shrinking dot on the horizon meant many things to the zentaur watching it.

Frankly, her first impression of the boy had been terrible. Not only had she been absolutely manhandled in their bout, but he'd lectured her just like the village elders had back home: they'd nagged her enough about honor this and valor that for a lifetime.

A warrior born on the northern isles was free to unleash endless savagery in battle, and the art of plunder was even considered beautiful; yet when peace arrived, the burden of responsibility was heavy. They didn't quite take pride in protecting the defenseless people of the land as imperial knights did, but the unspoken law that the mighty display dignity was a weighty one.

Dietrich—then Derek—had spat in the face of those values; she could see as much now.

Truth be told, she had let nothing restrain her for the greater part of her life. Anyone who got on her nerves could expect a punch or kick; she'd gotten into scuffles with her direct superiors with startling regularity. To realize that her misbehavior had stemmed from frustrations with how far away she was from her goals was downright embarrassing. Just thinking about it threatened to dye her entire head red, up to the gray tip of her ear.

Yet there was no denying the inflated, insatiable ego that had brought her wandering into the Empire. She'd managed to drift along, bending the world to her will with brute force, until her luck finally ran out.

Actually, on second thought, her defeat at Erich's hands had been good fortune too. Had it been anyone else, she might be long buried.

Instead of death, what awaited was a lesson in philosophy and a foe so unwavering that she hadn't been able to score a hit on him no matter how many times they sparred. A rival so perfect could hardly be found anywhere else.

Erich of Konigstuhl had been strong—stronger than any other.

He may have been small, but his blade was sharper than the biting gale of winter; his movements more formless than shadows in moonlight; his footwork less predictable than the course of falling leaves. No matter how feverishly she swung her axe, Dietrich hadn't managed to so much as split a hair on his head; the immeasurable chasm between them had driven her to despair more times than she could count.

Dietrich had been handily defeated at her full strength before, but only by the most elite warriors of her tribe. Never had she imagined that someone so powerful would be merrily snoozing away at a random campsite, and more unimaginable still, that he would see potential buried within her and take her under his wing.

At first, Dietrich had been angry at her loss. Unbefitting for a warrior as it was, she'd considered murdering him in his sleep; but surprisingly enough, traveling with him hadn't been bad at all.

Erich made good meals, and despite being the one footing the bill, he hadn't ever hoarded the lion's share of food for himself. In fact, despite his occasional grumbling, he'd always prepared enough for her to get her fill. The man was too kind for his own good, and Dietrich had taken note.

As she slowly warmed up to him, so too did she surely begin to listen to his sermons. Although his tone remained insolent for someone younger than her, the contents of his scoldings always elaborated on what she had done wrong.

Better still, they even offered an alternative: what she *could* have done right. For years, she'd been lashing out, trying to outrun the uncomfortable fog clinging fast to her heart. Yet bit by bit, she'd felt it begin to dissipate.

Dietrich's dream had resided at her hero's heels. She'd always been chasing him. But unable to keep up, she'd lost sight of why he'd inspired her in the first place: her unconscious had filled in the gaps with the easy answer of "because he's the best."

Now that her head was clear, it seemed silly: none of the heroes of her people had been the best at *everything*, anyway.

So tunneled in on becoming number one, she'd run down a path that brought her no closer to her dreams—only toward regret. If only she had looked at herself, she wouldn't have been cast out of her homeland.

Oh, the zentaur thought to herself. *But then I wouldn't have met him at all. Maybe it wasn't all bad.*

For all that had happened on the way, the journey had been fun. The days she'd spent working together with someone who respected and cared about her had been fulfilling. When she helped with something—even something small—he'd thank her; when she accomplished something, he'd praise her.

Sometimes, he would share ideas that Dietrich didn't understand. Yet the more she thought about them, the more she realized that those ideas were, in fact, cool. She'd gone her whole life thinking that weaklings weren't worth the time of day; but when she listened and carried herself with poise, wouldn't you know it, she realized that it felt good to earn their respect. She'd learned that lesson helping the poor merchants struggling with their delinquent guards. The twinkling eyes that the boy looked up at her with had revived a long-forgotten emotion within her: the one that had spurred her to want to be the greatest in the first place.

On top of that, she liked how he'd done everything he could to come up with a decent solution to a tough problem. Until now, Dietrich would have hastily thrown the whole canton into the bin to pick the path of greatest profit. But realistically, she would have inevitably realized that the coins in her purse had been bought with the deaths of hundreds, and that thought was sure to have weighed on her.

The world was full of land mines waiting to be set off. Had she sacrificed the innocent layfolk to collect the bounty on the bandits who shared their

hometown, every starving village and ruined town would make her wonder, *Is this what happened to those people too?*

Though the villagers shared some blame for their lack of foresight, no amount of blame shifted would have erased the prickling feeling in her heart. She knew now that every feat worthy of praising oneself led to one less sleepless night; good deeds were the building blocks for a foundation of self-respect.

That said, Dietrich was secretly a bit miffed: she'd told Erich that she'd think about what she would do, but no matter how much she racked her brain, she couldn't come up with anything better. Refusing the villagers' money would've made her feel like she'd been taken advantage of, and coming down on them any harder would've led to more people being hurt. If she'd just ignored the problem entirely, then the lives of the victims already claimed would've gnawed at her.

Drawn out by the experience, memories of all the decisions she'd made thus far in her life came back to fill her head to the brim. Even though Erich had said that answers only ever came once everything was settled, that didn't make it any less painful to think about the conundrums around her.

But Dietrich had a feeling she knew what he'd say: overcoming these challenges is part of being a true warrior.

Even that noble brat from the tournament hadn't turned out all that bad once Erich whipped some sense into him. When she'd cried about her failures as a little girl, her hero had done the same for her; how had she forgotten that success sprouted from failure? It was almost laughable. Her stance with a bow and her grip with an axe were nothing like what her parents had raised her with: to this day, her form mimicked what her hero had taught her on the day she'd clung to him bawling.

That episode had also reminded her of something important: the rage she felt at seeing an honest competition sullied made her realize the righteousness inherent in her dreams. Recognizing that her anger came from seeing the sincere efforts of hundreds of warriors treated like fodder made it apparent at last how much pride mattered to her as a virtue to uphold.

When she'd first signed up, the thought of a first-place finish in a rural

tournament hadn't seemed too impressive. Yet her competition had been earnest. Though some had entered just for fun, the majority had been there to win glory with their skills—to carve their names into the world through sheer force of will.

Dietrich had wanted to be the best because she wanted to be recognized. It was the same for everyone else. There wasn't a single human on the planet who could survive without craving at least a drop of attention; and if there was, she figured, then they weren't much of a human at all.

Last, but not least, this final adventure of theirs had taught her that one person's truth was another's fancy. She'd agreed to help because she felt bad for Rudolf and Helena, but never in her wildest dreams had she envisioned a standoff against some of the Empire's finest. While she knew the tale would match the best of those told around the table during her tribe's many feasts, the whole ordeal was so unreal that nobody would believe her.

Honestly, it was unbelievable enough that Erich had gone along with it. Despite having realized partway through that something was wrong—and grumbling about it to boot—he was sentimental enough that he'd stayed quiet, so as not to dampen Dietrich's excitement. Though, personally, she would've liked it better if he'd told her his suspicions *before* she'd gotten them into trouble.

Actually, come to think of it, Erich was a little *too* empathetic.

Taking an impartial look at herself, Dietrich realized that no normal person would've taken care of her to this degree. Her clothes couldn't have been cheap, but he'd bought them without much hesitation; for all his complaining about her diet, he'd never told her to eat less. In fact, he'd explicitly begun serving more food so she could get a full helping.

Above all else, even when she'd blown all her newly earned money—the incident had hurt her just as much as it'd hurt him—he hadn't thrown her out. He'd blown a fuse, of course, but that took balls to put up with at all: any other man would've forgone the lectures and just kicked her to the curb.

Not only had he shrugged it off with the casual outlook of, "Well, you better save up again," but his invective had all been made with Dietrich's well-being in

mind—not his own. That he would hand the purse strings to someone else even after she'd learned her lesson got to her a little bit, but she decided to put up with it on account of her past failings.

"I guess that's how he got to me."

The zentaur's new traveling buddy looked over, and she waved him off with a quiet laugh as she watched the dot on the horizon disappear.

All his kindness and care had made her really want him, and yet she'd been shot down. From how unfazed he'd looked, she figured that she really hadn't been a consideration at all for him. That kinda peeved her, but she understood all the same.

After all, Dietrich was a warrior, just the same as Erich. If she was going to settle down, then she'd want someone who had a chance of felling her in battle too. In the end, she hadn't managed to win a single time...but, well, that was only if she let this be the end.

Love and war weren't so different: another chance would come so long as she stayed alive. The world was a lot smaller than it seemed. They earned their keep in the same way and lived on the same big slab of land. That alone was probably enough for them to meet again.

Maybe a one-sided crush wasn't all that bad. Chasing the title of a man's dearest woman was kind of like chasing the title of becoming the greatest warrior. If that insatiable ambition would lead her to greater heights, then she didn't have any problem with taking the long way around.

All that was left for her to do was to pick herself up and head for the summit.

"All righty... Let's get to Innenstadt and knock back a drink, yeah?"

Win or lose, booze was indispensable. Kicking off the ground with a skip, Dietrich dreamed of a glass raised high: to celebrate her valor in battle, and to cradle her broken heart.

[Tips] Once connections are penciled in on both parties' character sheets, no half-hearted twist of fate will be able to rend them apart forever.

Postface

Ending

As a story goes on, PCs may find their goals diverging and say their farewells. But take heart: the paths of life are ever intertwining. New roads may bring new faces, but so too may they come with old friends.

Against the hustle and bustle of a busy year, winter's arrival was ever cold. The little canton had seen off wagonfuls of taxes, carefully packed into carriages; it had been merry during the jewel of its year in the annual harvest festival; it had quietly finished its preparations for the end of the year.

Throwing wood into hearths and stuffing cotton into clothes, the people of Konigstuhl huddled in their homes and awaited the spring season. With little to do but hole up, the bulk of them busied themselves with secondary, indoor occupations.

The Watch was the exception. Their busiest time of year stretched from the first yellowing of autumn to the first bloom of spring: raiders looking to poach the harvest came during fall, and the sparser imperial patrols during winter left mercenary groups free to muscle in on their own quarter. For the folks of a rural town, these were the greatest threats they could imagine.

As a result, Lambert had never once forgone his winter rounds in all his years as captain; so long as his legs could hold him upright, he wouldn't skip one in all the years yet to come. No matter how frigid the weather or how loud the moans of his men, the canton garrisons were always manned. Even today, when a rare sheet of snow blanketed the village, the watchmen were at their posts.

Just as cold and snow were not enough to end a war, villainy would not be impeded by icy conditions. Rather, the ever-refreshing blanket of white would wipe away any tracks. Now was when they needed to be most vigilant, jealously guarding their homes as a bear does its cave.

And when the Konigstuhl Watch needed help, it was the place of reserve watchmen to help them.

On this snowy day, the future huntsman of the canton was in charge of keeping an eye out, and woke up earlier than usual to do so. She stuffed her clothes tight with cotton: those with arthropod ancestry weren't as comfortable in the cold as their mensch peers. Most bug-like demihumans found themselves cooped up every winter whether they meant to or not, and it was always a wonder to them how humanfolk went about their lives like it was any other season.

But even as her body cried and begged to stay by the fireplace, the huntress picked up her bow and left her house. Braving the elements despite the creaky pain setting into her stomach and joints was for the good of the canton, of course, but today, there was another reason.

Curiously enough, her favorite earring had been very talkative yesterday. Despite there not having been any wind to speak of, it jingled and jangled at every turn.

The huntress walked along the same patrol route she always did, on the lookout for the occasional broken branch, the odd pile of ruffled leaves, or a footprint in the snow. Unlike the denizens of the forest, people were so very eager to leave a trail. Whether humanfolk, demihuman, or demonfolk, they all may as well have pranced around while singing at the tops of their lungs.

Today, she discovered nothing strange in the canton. The closest thing to a new development was the rumor that someone had already caught the first winter cold. The roads were the same as ever, and she found no evidence of anyone trying to sneakily survey the lay of the land.

The gods were in Their heaven, and all was truly right with the world.

Taking perch in a tree for a lunch break, the huntress tilted her head: perhaps her hunch had been off. Personally, she was confident in her intuition, and the times when her earring jingled were practically guaranteed to mean something.

But I suppose everybody has off days, she figured. With her afternoon schedule free, she decided to hunt for a small bird or hare and make a little extra coin before heading home—when suddenly, her sharp senses began to

tingle.

Aided by the vantage of her treetop perch, her keen eyes could barely make out the movements of a silhouette just beyond the horizon. The slow, leisurely bob making its way toward her was that of someone on horseback.

Strange. The huntress's mind shifted gears. Obviously, this was not a forgiving season for travelers. Any southbound merchants trying to race the cold were long gone; this was no scout for a mercantile caravan.

Then perhaps the vanguard of a mercenary band looking for homes to hijack?

Yet that, too, seemed unlikely. There was only one jockey without any backup, and the steed was bulky with luggage—no advance scout would weigh themselves down like that. Furthermore, they lacked both the large weapons synonymous with mercenary warfare and even armor. But most of all, one could search up and down the world over and never find a lone mercenary traveling with *two* horses, one relegated to carrying cargo.

That left either an eccentric vagabond, a wandering knight, or a courier on urgent dispatch from some noble or another. Whatever the case, there was no more need to worry. Yet just as she let her guard down, the huntress's earring made a sound.

This earring had been with her for nearly three years now. She'd pierced her ears many more times since then, adorning herself with accessories, and even earning her first tattoo as she came of age. Yet of all her ornaments, this one alone never left her side; in turn, there were only two occasions when it made its presence known.

The first was when she found herself in grave danger.

The second was what she had felt this morning...

As the figure approached, the rider came into clear view and set the huntress's heart aflutter. He was small for a mensch, but the ease and grace he displayed atop his saddle was the unmistakable carriage of a warrior.

The frosty winter daylight gleamed a bright gold off his hair. Lit like the sun on a comfortable spring day, she had a feeling that the strands of blond belonged to someone all too familiar.

No, she *knew* they did. The huntress knew the horseman—she was sure of it.

Before her earring could spur her on any further, she'd already jumped to the next tree over. Unable to contain herself any longer, she sprinted across the forest canopy. She would recognize that figure anywhere, even if the heavens themselves came crashing down to earth.

Zipping from branch to branch with footwork incomparable to her juvenile form, the huntress erased herself from the woods. As of late, even her own mother had trouble sniffing her out; she was at the level where she could catch flighty pheasants with her bare hands.

Oh! I knew it! Perfectly upright, like a pole was propping up his spine, the boy was the same as ever. He'd grown in the months and years of his absence, but she wouldn't mistake him for the world.

Bringing her full sprint to a stop, the huntress found the perfect spot to hide.

There, she waited—still and silent. Letting instinct take the wheel, she was prepared to unleash the polished methods of her people.

He was only fifty paces out now. This was surefire range with her bow, but a projectile wouldn't do. A plain arrow would be cut down in an instant.

No, she would wait for the perfect opportunity: leaping down from twice the height of an average mensch, she would end things in one strike.

The huntress had no doubts. Ordinarily, falling from a place like this would mean risking serious injury—especially when landing on a mark without solid footing. If her prey swatted her away, she could even lose her life.

Yet the possibility of hesitation did not even cross her mind: after all, not once had he ever failed to catch her.

[Tips] Travelers tend to coop themselves up in inns and cantons for the winter just like other lay folk; that, or they migrate south to avoid snow. Out for work in the quiet months, adventurers and mercenaries are much the same.

Snowfalls were few and far between in the southern parts of the Trialist Empire. Yet the first flakes had begun to flutter just one day after we'd settled the engagement fiasco, and it had begun to stick the day after that; the gods were clearly in a strange mood. No matter how well people could bear the cold, shoveling snow off roads and roofs was surely a novel challenge for everyone in the region.

I hadn't set foot outside the canton before being whisked away to Berylin, so I didn't quite get that nostalgic fuzziness of slowly coming across familiar sights. But if nothing else, the uncommon weather had me feeling a bit excited. Don't tell my family, though: they were probably cradling their heads right about now over how much firewood they'd burn through this winter.

Exhaling a puff of smoke, I soaked in the feeling that my beloved Konigstuhl was close. In the two months since my rainy departure from the capital, a lot had happened. Too much, even.

After dodging an impromptu mercenary recruitment drive, I'd found myself adopting a zentaur warrior and using my old employer's parting gift to get out of a sticky situation. But just as I'd patted myself on the back for setting a dumb kid back on the right path, I'd stumbled into a bodyguard arrangement that was secretly a noble lady's "elopement" all along. That about sums things up nicely, I think.

In the end, the girl got home safely, nobody died, and in spite of one young man's broken heart, the experience made for a good story...right? It was a good story... I mean...right?

Yeah, never mind. That was some bullshit.

That had to have been in my top ten worst experiences of all time. I wasn't charitable enough to promote this absolute clusterfuck into a "good story." If the GM didn't tip *something* in my favor in recognition of my fruitless labor, I was convinced the gods would look the other way while I beat them silly.

Back when I'd said my farewells to Dietrich, I'd thought to myself that it hadn't been all that bad. Looking back again, no. It *had* been all that bad. Why'd I have to endure this onslaught of chaos just to get to my damn hometown?

Thinking about it rationally, the last one had been godsawful in every way.

The retainers who'd stayed behind to buy time were surely dead, the ones waiting in Innenstadt were out of a job, and poor Rudolf was heartbroken. Basically the only person with a happy ending was Miss Helena.

That wasn't even to mention how much Sir Bertram had lost, nor did it touch on the debt Sir Wiesenmuhle now owed to a future *count* from now till the end of time. The girl had managed to cause trouble for literally *everyone*. Worst of all, my heart went out to the poor soldiers following orders to participate in a wild goose chase, only to be cut down by me and Dietrich.

Handling incidents like this one week after week had left me exhausted and convinced that I was, indeed, cursed. Back when I'd first set off, I'd thought to myself that maybe, just maybe, I'd have a nice and boring trip home. If I could pen my past self a letter now, it would simply read, "Oh, don't you worry."

The constant stress of my trip had gotten me very used to the sensation of smoke in my lungs. Right now, I was puffing on a remedy for sore throats: the dry winter air had gotten to me last night, and I was feeling a bit raspy.

I'd come across far too much action in the time since I'd hacked up my first drag of the pipe in the madam's atelier, but I digress. For now, I wanted to look forward instead of backward: I was finally approaching Konigstuhl. The spring of my twelfth year was far, far away now. As short as my retainership was compared to the tenure of the average indentured servant, three years of my youth was a sizable commitment. Time just flows so differently when you have little of it under your belt.

The last of my leaves turned to ash and my throat regained its usual vigor—the counterintuitive effect of soothing my throat by smoking still messed with my brain—so I put my pipe away. At last on familiar roads, I straightened myself up...only for a faint tingling sensation to dance on my neck.

I could hardly even perceive it. In my time running errands for Lady Agrippina, I'd crossed paths with many an experienced assassin. Their ill will had been as silent as it was heavy, nigh unnoticeable without keen intuition; yet this feeling was even harder to grasp than Miss Nakeisha's presence.

For a second, I thought that perhaps a wild animal was looking my way. I reached back to cover my neck—when a familiar, comforting shiver ran up my

spine to meet my hand.

Ahh, I know this feeling...and I know what comes next.

I pulled at the reins as quickly as I could, but I'd been just a few beats too slow. A foreign hand clasped my neck, pulling me into a tight grip from behind: my neck was locked in by an arm, and lithe, carapaced legs coiled around my torso.

I was dead. I'd fumbled my reaction and my vitals were open for the taking.

But you know what? That's fine.

"Got you!"

Because there's only one person who'd greet me this way. And if she already has me under her thumb, then what's the point in resisting?

"I wonder how many losses that makes," I said.

"Dear me, you certainly have gotten better at playing the fool. Don't pretend you've lost count, now."

I sighed and rattled off a number; she read my timing to count the same number at the same time.

"I'm home, Margit."

"Yes, you are. Welcome home, Erich."

Taking the small hand on my neck into my own, I announced my return with the whole of my heart; she answered with a tone that lingered long in my ear. She then wriggled around to my front side, masterfully scuttling for purchase without poking me where it would hurt.

Still round, her face had hardly changed at all. Her two hazel eyes gleamed with life, and the spidery ones by the bases of her pigtails practically twinkled. The entirety of her small frame was covered in a dark and fluffy set of traditional hunting wear reserved for tested arachne; yet she herself was the same as ever.

“You’ve gotten so pretty while I was away.”

“My, what a silver tongue you have. And *you* have become a splendid man.”

Yet for all that remained the same, Margit felt more mature, somehow. Regardless of how at home she would look in a grade school, the air about her was that of an independent adult. She, like me, had come of age in these three years, and I had no doubt she’d proven herself an asset to her family trade; there was a confidence about her that could only come from experience.

Her earring let out a small clink. Though her ears were now covered in accessories, seeing the one conspicuously girly pink shell shine bright among its steely peers threatened to melt my heart.

I pushed up my long hair to show her my own; that must’ve made her feel the same way, as she nuzzled into my chest just as she’d done all those years ago. I was worried the rugged flax of my shirt would scratch her squishy cheeks, but she didn’t have a care in the world as she merrily rubbed up to me with a wide grin.

“But you know,” she said, “I’m glad to see that neither of us has changed.”

“Yeah,” I said. “I am too.”

Our sappy little interlude was interrupted by Castor, who whinnied as if to say, “Hey, what do you think you’re doing back there?” I fixed my posture and scooted back, opening up some space for Margit to sit too.

“What splendid horses you have. I might even mistake you for a noble.”

“I doubt you’d ever find a noble dressed in travel wear as cheap as this.”

“Really? But when the minstrels sing of wellborn heroes touring the lands, they’re always dressed like you are now. I think you look marvelous.”

Being praised so overtly nearly drew out a very unbecoming smile. Pulling myself together, I cradled my childhood companion in my arms and chatted away as we slowly rode toward the village.

“You know, I feel as if you’ve really grown up, Erich.”

“You think?”

Happy as I was to hear that, the truth was that it wasn’t the result of a purely natural process.

Since I’d been on my own again for the last leg of my trip, I’d preemptively taken a few social skills to avoid being picked on. The miscellaneous incidents on my way home had given me a little bit of leeway, so I’d figured it was worth hedging against any future trouble.

I’d started off by bumping my Negotiation skill to Scale VI, and then picked up cheap traits like Lingering Timbre and Nightingale’s Resonance to improve the carriage of my voice. With this, I was hoping I’d be able to come off as a smooth talker.

For when things skipped discussion entirely, Overwhelming Grin would let me scare off small fry without having to resort to a more physical kind of negotiation check. I was particularly pleased with this purchase: I could pick and choose when to activate the skill, and despite being rather pricey, it came with the wonderful feature of allowing me to use my proficiency in *different* skills that might induce fear in others to determine its effectiveness. What this meant for me was that I could just shut up and smile to power my intimidation attempts with Divine Hybrid Sword Arts.

But a smile that could kill someone in the right situation hadn’t been enough for me. I’d splurged on the high-level, always-on trait Oozing Gravitas. Like the last, this let me use my strength in battle to affect my charisma. Put in TRPG terms, I received a flat bonus to negotiations that scaled with my overall level as an adventurer.

Putting everything together, I'd managed to throw out the weak parts of my image. Now, I wasn't going to make the average thug flinch just by standing there like Sir Lambert, but I doubted I'd have random goons treating me like a naive kid.

"I really do," Margit said. "Though, I must admit, I'm pleased to see you haven't gotten as big as I'd feared. You're the perfect height to jump on as you are now."

"Urk..."

Man, she went there... I knew Ursula had fidgeted with my physical build, but I was still way shorter than I'd planned on. Back in my childhood, I'd invested enough experience to get me at least past the 180 centimeter mark, and I could've sworn I was supposed to be more muscular.

Why was I so small? Was the system bugging out? This blessing of mine came from the future Buddha himself; how the heck was a mere alf toying with things from *within* the system winning? Or perhaps that was exactly it: maybe this otherworldly power was defaulting to the values given to it by the world or something, and that was what fairies could tweak.

I was overthinking things. At fifteen, I would've still been in my third year of middle school—I'd make up the difference by the time I turned eighteen. Yup, there was nothing to fear. Or at least, I had to keep telling myself that for now.

"I'm sure everyone will be shocked to see you."

"You think? Well, to be honest, I *did* kind of want to surprise everyone. That's why I didn't send a letter beforehand."

"If nothing else, *I* was *very* surprised, and I'm sure everyone else will be too. In fact, I suspect you'll set off a second harvest festival."

Laughing at Margit's hyperbole, the town finally came into sight. Fields packed up for the winter, guard posts towering above the empty countryside, and little houses sparsely dotting the land—how many times had I longed for this view in the time that I'd been gone?

I've done it. I'm finally back.

“Now that we’re here, let me receive you again. Welcome home, Erich.”

“Yeah... I’m home.”

To have somewhere to return to was truly a bliss like no other.

I’d come home to my beloved Konigstuhl.

“*Sniff...*”

“What’s wrong?”

Yet in the midst of hugging to celebrate my long-awaited return, the little arachne in my arms began to sniff at me. Not only did her people not have any established culture of communicating through scent, but their noses weren’t even particularly good: I didn’t know what she was doing.

“I smell quite a few unfamiliar women on you... I take it you’ve been enjoying yourself in the capital?”

“Bwah?! N-No, I just made a lot of friends!”

And so, the first tale I shared of my life away was not a display of valor or heroics: it was the sorry excuse of a stupid man.

[Tips] There are guarded checkpoints at each of the borders between administrative states within the Empire. In order to check for criminals and contraband, these traffic stops impede on individual liberties—that is, if you don’t have a noble’s writ of passage.

One Full Henderson

Ver0.5

1.0 Hendersons

A derailment significant enough to prevent the party from reaching the intended ending.

The tale that follows is not from the time line we know—but it might have been, had the dice fallen differently...

One Full Henderson ver0.5

1.0 Hendersons

A derailment significant enough to prevent the party from reaching the intended ending.

The principle holds everywhere, in every age: if you're up to no good, a small group in private is the best place to be.

The scene was a remote mansion at the capital's edge. In public record, a lower-caste aristocrat had wrung out his wallet to purchase this estate as a second home for the winter social season; in practice, the place served as the secret hideaway for a handful of nobles. Each concealed themselves with hoods either enchanted or blessed to obscure their identities to an extreme degree. Had they not exchanged talismans to know who was who beforehand, they could have stared straight into one another's eyes and still forgotten they'd ever met as soon as they turned away—their caution knew no bounds.

The manor they were in belonged not to a member of their own faction, but one of a trivial subfaction of their group. Despite having practically nothing to do with their efforts, the owner had been compelled to let the shadowy group renovate it over the course of a few years, until it was eventually a spy-proof fortress.

Not content with donning anonymizing mantles, the participants had also arrived in a standard workman's buggy. These *nobles* had forgone the comfort of a suspended carriage to be hauled in the back of a cargo-filled cart; the importance of this meeting hardly needed stating.

"That makes everyone."

One man—presumably the ringleader—looked around the physically and magically isolated room and counted up the heads. Six people in total sat around a rectangular table; they nodded at his words, and each began to lay

their own documents out for all to see.

“I’ve prepared everything according to plan. On the day of, every guard on duty will be one of our own. That is, except the captain...”

“That, too, is coming along. After pulling a few strings, I’ve made it so that his superior will invite him out for an audience that day, leaving only the vice-captain present.”

“Perfect. The vice-captain is a mere knight: a little pressure from above will be enough to keep him at bay.”

“On my end, I’ve pulled the port’s operational staff into our orbit. Our moles are just right: they’ll get the job done, but will be easy enough to cut loose at the end.”

“Recruiting magia has gone smoothly as well. Five of our compatriots have developed means to spoof the security hexes. Even if a bolt of lightning comes crashing down from the heavens, the College won’t detect a thing.”

One by one, the small crew made their reports. The files littering the tabletop were stamped with words like “Confidential,” “Transcription Prohibited,” and “Relocation Forbidden.” Sheets of protective arcane formulae had been pressure-bound into every page to prevent any alterations, copying, or unauthorized movement beyond its original location. That security systems this potent were still in place was proof of how secret these government documents were, but it mattered little when the thieves had as much money and influence as they did.

“How about the materials? We couldn’t get our hands on them last time.”

“Worry not. That nosy head accountant will be too busy heading home to inherit the family title—I’ve made sure of that. While I haven’t managed to pull the replacement into our bubble, I doubt he’ll pose any problem: he’s a simple numbers man. So long as our documents are in order, I imagine he’ll be content to simply fiddle with his abacus.”

“And what of the church? I recall we were having difficulties finding incentives that would work to pull at their strings.”

“I called upon some idle loafers to stir up trouble in their ranks. Last I heard,

they'd resumed their pointless debates over which god ought to exert most control over the thing. With its debut on the horizon, that single spark has kept the clergy most busy."

"Then all is well. Now, then..."

All of those present knew what was to come, and they turned toward the man directing the discussion. As was imperial custom, the leader sat alone along the short side of the table, and he scanned the others for a moment; after a dramatic pause, he produced a large sheet of paper from his pocket and laid it flat across the table.

"My word, so this is it..."

"Absolutely *stunning*. Why, this is a perfect recreation!"

"I always had faith in you, but this is simply incredible."

A blueprint imbued with the highest degree of anticounterfeit technology sprawled out over the other papers. It depicted a ship: a leviathan of a craft, shaped like a flat, stretched-out arrowhead. Memos written by the original designers littered the page alongside hastily scribbled calculations—the latter no doubt in relation to the total load and stress the final product could bear. The document was as close to the real thing as a forgery could possibly get.

At the top was the title: Aerial Conquestship, Codename Theresea-class.

Twenty years ago, the initial concept of this project had marked a turning point in the Empire's grandiose plans to build a flying armada—and here was the completed design. True, the final specifications included a handful of minor tweaks, but for almost all intents and purposes, this was the real deal.

The real things sat in a dry dock at the largest airfield in all of Rhine. Located in Kolnia, the capital of the Ubiorum county, talented engineers were currently working on the rigging in preparation for their first test flight due to come in half a year's time.

"Beautiful... It astounds me that they managed to make something so massive so light."

"But will six arcane furnaces truly suffice to lift a vessel of this mass? Look

how much larger this design is compared to the first aeroship. I'm worried the thing will crumble apart as soon as the physical reinforcement enchantments wear off."

"Ah, but see here: they've alchemically refined tankfuls of lighter-than-air gas with hedge magic to support the weight. This is no *Alexandrine*—it won't need a drop of mana to hold itself together."

Named after one of the Empire's former rulers, three tentatively christened Theresea-class vessels had already entered production; yet their builds remained somewhat experimental in nature. Each fielded a slightly different arsenal in order to confirm the airworthiness of various constructions before moving into mass production. The skies were not yet mankind's domain, and many were the issues that could only be discovered after a craft took off.

Even so, the new conquestships were *exceedingly* close to perfect.

By dividing the vessels into segments, each individual piece could be built on its own to make for rapid assembly; any damage could be repaired just as quickly by simply swapping out the broken bits. Though lift and control required immense amounts of mana, the craft was fitted to haul much more fuel than it needed. This slack in the system meant any future revisions would be child's play: even if the rest of the world caught up, the ships could be easily remodeled and sent back to the front lines with a new suite of toys.

None could deny the sheer elegance of their design. The *Theresea* and her sisters were ladies of great rank, ready to shape the history of the century to come...

"Impressive. The *Alexandrine*'s destruction came when she was at port, during a maintenance mishap, and the ease of repair of this new model is a clever way around repeating the same mistakes. It truly is a shame."

"That it is. If only this design had been *ours*."

"If only. Then those upstarts would have stayed in their place."

...but to those gathered tonight, they were no better than a gang of wicked witches.

The current state of imperial aeroship development saw the field dominated

by sympathizers with the sitting Emperor: despite the incredible momentum of the industry, there were only a few key individuals actively pushing it forward.

Reworded, this meant the massive grants given out by the state were controlled by a small in-group. On top of that, they would be the only ones to be celebrated in the event of a success—something that would indirectly weaken the positions of many in adjacent fields.

Count Agrippina von Ubiorum, the preeminent figure in the aeronautics world, kept an extremely tight leash on the public funds entrusted to her, to great success. Not only did her scrutiny keep would-be spies at bay, but it had let her expedite development to the point that technologies once thought to have been a century away had been completed in twenty short years under her leadership. What she'd accomplished was already enough to guarantee that she'd forever be remembered as one of the most brilliant figures in all of Rhinian history.

Yet, as ever, the reactions of those outcompeted by history-defining heroes were as passionate as they were bitter.

The stakes were simply too high. To be left behind by the aeroship sector could spell doom: even now, the economic disparity between participants and nonparticipants was becoming unbridgeable.

Perhaps the absurdity of the situation was best told through an example. There had been a viscount who led a faction of middling size. But, in a twist of fate, his lands had been deemed the perfect spot for one of the few aeroship construction facilities in the Empire. That man was now a *count*, and one of the wealthiest individuals in the entire country.

Striking stories of success invariably spawned envy and interference. Though every imperial noble ultimately shared the table of the nation they called Rhine, many could not bear to see the cups of those they sat beside being filled with finer wines than their own.

As a matter of course, there emerged schemers hell-bent on sabotaging progress to trigger a reorganization of the status quo. Once positions opened up, they would swoop in to lay claim to a piece of the pie.

"But if these containers of gas they're employing support a significant portion

of the weight, then they're also a point of weakness. Am I understanding that correctly?"

The ringleader directed his question toward one of his subordinates in particular, who nodded with full confidence. The hooded expert pulled out a different document and spread it out for all to see: it contained computations based on publicly announced specifications detailing how to ground the aeroship.

"That's correct. My compatriots and I have calculated that destroying a third of the vessel's tanks will surely cause it to crash. This method is far more reliable than trying to fiddle with the complex mystic systems aboard."

"And if the Emperor is on the ship at the time, he'll be forced to reexamine whom he entrusts these projects to going forward."

A chorus of low, sinister chuckles echoed across the room.

The most effective and reliable way of ruining someone's reputation was to have them be responsible for an inexcusable failure in view of both their supervisor and the general public. While the test flights would be held in secret, the ship's maiden voyage would carry the Emperor himself. If they could sneak on and discreetly sabotage the air tanks a few days prior to that, the status quo of the field would *have* to change.

Although the project brought untold riches to those who succeeded, it necessitated equivalent punishment for those who failed: many would lose the privilege of involvement, and some could even be stripped of their lands. In the most extreme case, there was a real chance that the Emperor himself could be pulled off the throne and replaced with someone more sympathetic to the conspirators' cause.

"Well, then. Everything is in place."

"That it is. I leave the rest to you. Remember: guarantee failure, but not to the point of catastrophe. It would be such a shame to have to throw this design out entirely."

"Ahh, soon the funds to reconstruct the ship will fall to us..."

"I wonder if there isn't any way for us to claim the airport at Kolnia as well. I'd

love to see the look on that haughty methuselah's face when we snap that upturned nose—nay, those pointed *ears*—right off."

"Hah. The count thaumapalatine is known to be oh so beautiful. I imagine her reaction would be a sight to behold."

As the group's quiet laughter began to rise into an outright cackle, one member noticed something strange. They turned to face the exit and raised one finger to bid their comrades to silence.

Voices could be heard off in the distance—shouts, even. The clamor was joined by the faraway sound of clashing metal to create the unmistakable cacophony of battle.

"It can't be!"

"What's going on?! Let us call for our guards to—"

"No, first we escape! This room has a secret hatch!"

"Th-That's right! Hurry, grab the documents! The sellswords will buy us enough time as is!"

Despite their surprise at having been discovered, the schemers managed to scramble together their belongings and prepare to flee. They'd known that even the most cautious plan couldn't be completely concealed, and had prepared an escape route in advance.

Furthermore, this estate had more guards than the owner's peerage would lead one to believe. Better yet, they were all mercenaries and wandering swords for hire, content to work for anyone given the right price: their capture would lead to minimal information leakage.

"Where was the hatch, again?!"

"Over here!"

One of the plotters with relatively little to pack away asked about the escape route, and another deftly groped about a false cabinet. By manipulating the metal ornamentation on its edges in a specific order, a hidden exit would appear.

But a creeping doubt took hold of the man inputting the code. Why had his

compatriot asked where the hatch was? This hideout had been developed by all of the members in tandem, and none of them were stupid enough to just forget.

Yet that was as far as he got before his train of thought vanished into the realm of the unconscious. The man who'd asked the question suddenly leapt over the table and brought his fist crashing down on the back of the answerer's head.

"What?!"

"Have you gone mad?!"

"Wha—eep!"

An abrupt storm of violence engulfed the gloomy lair. The man at its center had initially been seated next to the entrance, and had clearly done something suspect, for the door meant only to unlock when approached with the right mystic token and physical key opened on its own; a giant shadow slithered in uninvited.

The two merciless tempests tore through the room in less time than it took for the first victim to slide to the floor, drawing a line of blood as his face skidded down the wall. Of all of them, only the ringleader managed to retain consciousness; yet even so, he found himself constricted in a gargantuan trunk that robbed him of mobility. Through his clothes, countless jagged legs pricked at him from the coil.

"Wh-What's the meaning of this?! Why have you betrayed—"

"Betrayed? I was never on your side, Sir Lukas."

Breaking the unwritten rule to not use one another's real names, the traitor pulled off his hood. With a snap of his fingers, his face began to melt off like a wax statue subjected to heat. Though the scene was frightful enough to make anyone swallow their breath, what the oozing outer layer left behind was neither sinewy muscle nor gooey flesh.

Instead, it unveiled a thin face—one belonging to a man that the ringleader had never seen before. Though his features were too gentle to be called intimidating, there was a callous glint in his kitten-blue eyes, and his tightly

wound blond hair gleamed more perilously than any blade.

“Wh-Wha—but—who are *you*?! What have you done to Baron Radomir?!”

“Oh, don’t worry. He’s perfectly safe—er, well, perfectly *alive*. I simply used a little cantrip to borrow the skin on his face.”

The man wiped away the bits clinging to his face with a handkerchief. Noticing a presence at the door—which had been slammed back shut amidst the chaos—he jumped back over the table and opened it. Upon doing so, he took a solemn knee and prepared to welcome whoever was to enter.

“Behave yourself. Lady Agrippina of the Ubiorum county and Sir Gundahar of the Donnersmarck marquisate have arrived.”

“Wha... *What?!*”

Accompanied by a crew of personal knights, a pair of methuselah dressed in lavish evening wear entered the room. The woman boasted a pair of conspicuous, heterochromic eyes and a perfectly set silver do; the man elegantly pulled off the recent trend of slim-fit clothes and flashed a saintly smile.

“How do you do, Count Wismar? I believe we last saw one another at the garden party, yes?”

“It has been some time, Lukas. Wit must thank you for your gift celebrating my cousin’s marriage. Has he penned you a letter of gratitude yet? As good a fellow as he is, he can be rather forgetful about these sorts of things.”

Both methuselah greeted the captive man as if they weren’t meeting in the least reputable conditions possible; Lukas von Wismar could feel their irony carving holes in his heart with every word.

He’d put every fiber of his being into this plot. Despite all the dependable vassals at his disposal, he’d gotten to work with his own two hands to keep as much information confidential as possible. The only ones to know anything had been his partners in crime, and they had only ever exchanged intelligence with the utmost care.

Above all else, he had done everything in his power to keep his targets in the

dark. He'd spared no expense in making certain that not even an offhand rumor would reach the ears of the two highest authorities in aeroship design, the Emperor's most trusted retainers.

Yet the heroine of the generation was here. The count thaumapalatine had embedded herself in the foundation of the Empire in twenty short years, and she paid absolutely no mind to the trembling mastermind as she began sifting through the papers on the table.

"Oh dear, oh my. Why, this is terrible! Won't you take a look at this, Gundahar?"

"Well, well, well. This is terrible, indeed, Count Ubiorum. How could so many secret documents have been stolen away like this? Wit suppose the College's counterintelligence committee isn't what it used to be."

"Oh, don't be so harsh. 'Where there's a will, there's a way,' as they say. To do anything one sets their mind to is the root of all sorcery. As lamentable as the goal has proven to be, this is the product of somebody's blood, sweat, and tears."

"If only that effort had been made in service of His Majesty—oh, what a tremendous waste. What a tragedy! Sad as it makes me to say, Wit have no other choice but to report you for high treason, Lukas."

Their flamboyant act was a declaration that they were neither disappointed nor surprised. Lukas was made to realize that they had *known*.

They'd caught on somewhere. He didn't know where, but *somewhere*, there had been a split in the seams. They'd tugged at the frayed edges, pulling the tear open to unearth the opportunity to strike back.

At this rate, the oligarchs' grip would only grow stronger. He hadn't strayed into the realm of assassination, but knowingly targeting the flight that the Emperor was to be a part of was absolutely treason. In fact, it was undeniably *high* treason. Both he and his lackeys would be put to death, their families stripped of any privileges and their wealth reclaimed as part of the national treasury.

Nothing would be left of them. Though every person in this room continued

to draw breath, they were already dead and forgotten.

"You... You set me up!"

"My, how *rude* of you. Wouldn't you agree, Gundahar?"

"But of course, Count Ubiorum. After all, the two of us simply happened upon an anonymous tip and rushed to combat a potential threat to national security."

Don't lie to me, you snooping devils! The man wanted to scream, but he was gagged before any more complaints could leave his mouth.

No matter how big the fish, there was no escape once the netting was in place; here, he had already been hauled helplessly onto deck. The dark reality that awaited him hit the would-be mastermind with the violence of an ocean swell, plunging him into despair.

[Tips] Though the Empire's penal code tends to avoid punishments of association, the penalties for high treason are enough to effectively wipe out entire clans, whether they be noble or common.

I took a drag, inhaling smoke-filtered night air and the scent of conspiracy as the Mother Goddess watched overhead—I'd grown all too used to this familiar scene.

But then again, how could I have not? I was a middle-aged man who'd spent the last twenty years running around and playing spy, after all.

Keeping lookout from the rooftop, I watched my men and our allies below tie up the traitors into a single file line and carry away boxes full of sensitive documents. The two directors of this operation had dragged the man behind it all behind closed doors for the unsexiest bit of nighttime "fun" imaginable.

I pitied the fool. He was going to be toyed with by a bookworm more interested in stories than reality and a power fetishist who coveted authority not as a means, but as an end goal. Everything he'd built up over the course of his life was going to be reduced to dust at the hands of two demented freaks. Misguided as his ambitions may have been, I couldn't help but feel sorry for

him.

Having information forcibly extracted from the innermost depths of one's soul was excruciating, even in a sterilized training setting. Those two were surely going to be careful not to let him die, only extending his suffering. Figuring that the gods weren't uncharitable enough to smite me for pitying a criminal—honestly, if those two psychopaths could walk around with their heads held high, then I was definitely in the clear—I offered up a futile prayer. As I did, a figure approached me from behind.

"Good evening. Tonight's moon is as lovely as ever."

"I suppose it is," I answered.

Covered in deep navy wrappings that blended into the night, the giant shadow that had silently crept up behind me was the very same one that had joined me in wrecking the secret lair. Countless skittering legs lined her trunk, capped off by the two jagged appendages pointing out from the tail end. Of her two sets of arms, the lower pair was folded into her clothes, out of sight.

Speaking without so much as moving her mouth, the woman's too-perfect features looked fake under the moonlight. She was pretty to the point of leaving no impression, forgettable despite being clearly unique. Looking back, my history with this red-haired beauty had been a long one.

"It would appear we are allies once again," she said.

"And judging from how things are shaking out, this stint is looking like it'll be an extended venture. More people have been implicated than I can count on my hands, and catching them all before they can pack up and flee will be a real undertaking. Our masters have thrown you and me both into a terrible mess."

"Not at all. I'm quite enjoying myself, in fact."

Nakeisha's voice had a tinge of delight to it—though as ever, she expertly kept her expression from moving to match. She took a seat beside me and reached over with an open palm as if what came next was self-evident.

It was: I handed her the cigar I'd been smoking without a word, and she took it into her own mouth without a hint of suspicion.

Once upon a time, the two of us had been mortal enemies, ready to fight to the death. There was only one explanation as to why we could share a smoke now: for all their fighting, Lady Agrippina and Marquis Donnersmarck were the kinds of nutcases to see no problem with working together if their interests aligned.

Anyone who worked under these demented minds was forced to act all buddy-buddy with people that may very well have killed their bosses, subordinates, friends, or family. Governed by compromise and efficiency, this twisted cooperative relationship had been severed and retied over and over again like a toxic marriage. Trying to count up how many times we'd linked arms or crossed blades only to betray or be betrayed at the last moment was futile.

"Tired, I take it?" Nakeisha said. "This is a rather potent stuffing."

"Can you blame me? I've been wearing someone else's face and living his life for months on end. Absorbing another person's memories like a list of memos takes its toll."

Slightly shorter now, the cigar returned to me, and I made the end glow once more. At some point, I'd succumbed to the need for efficiency; as classless as it was seen to be, I almost always elected to smoke snuff in paper wrappings unless I was exceptionally unbusy. That stuffing my pipe had become more of a chore than an elegant charm spoke to how cooked I was as a person. Though, in truth, the ease of swapping out mixtures for something that could conceal a catalyst made disposables much more convenient.

Down to an unusable stump, I reached into my pocket for a replacement. Annoyingly enough, I realized that I hadn't grabbed one of my own cigars, but one matching the tastes of the man I'd been living as. I pushed down my irritation by handing the crude roll off to Nakeisha, and she stuck it into her mouth without a word.

Assuming a false identity was tough enough, and stealing someone's face *and* memories was draining. I acknowledged that this was the most surefire way of infiltrating the enemy, but trampling over taboos by the dozens was hardly healthy for the mind and soul.

Honestly, how did I end up getting used to a life like this?

I'd long since given up on trying to uncover the truth; the factors that had led me here could fill a convoluted mystery novel several times over. Put to paper, it would be a winding series of thick tomes wherein each enigma would branch into several smaller ones, all to culminate in a final volume where the identity of the culprit would be left to the reader's discretion. Thinking about it was a waste of time.

But whatever the details were, one thing was clear: I'd escaped servitude to head out on an adventure, but I hadn't escaped Lady Agrippina's machinations.

If I had to guess, I'd say that heeding the madam's "advice" to begin working near the capital as opposed to the frontier had been the biggest factor. I'd given it a hesitant try to great success, and by the time I'd fetched my childhood partner to set up near Berylin, I was already ensnared in an inescapable trap.

And so, here I was, working as Lady Agrippina's secret agent. My basic mastery of manners made me a handy pawn in high society, and on the surface, I remained an adventurer trusted by the upper-crust clientele of the city. Yet I could hardly say I'd realized my dreams when my main duties involved this sort of underhanded bloodshed.

The cigar flicked up and down in the corner of my vision: Nakeisha was asking for a flame. I knew she couldn't use magic, but I doubted she actually lacked the means to light it herself.

Still, after pulling out another fresh stick of my own choosing and passing the flame from the smoldering butt, I leaned over toward her. The tips of our cigars pressed against each other, and the embers between them glowed redder than the flesh of intertwining tongues.

Locking eyes as we waited for the flame to pass, I flicked the used stump off the roof. The spell I'd cast when first lighting it shifted into its final phase, vaporizing what was left over before it could hit the ground. A used cigar was a vault of personal information waiting to be plundered; I wasn't about to let a single cinder remain.

We exhaled. Two shades of smoke tangled together and wove around us like coiling centipedes.

“...This is awful. What kind of man were you impersonating?”

“The kind who was as bad as his taste in cigars.”

Clearly she didn’t appreciate my gift. I didn’t like the flavor either, but I’d put up with it because a sudden change was liable to draw suspicion; she was getting this cigar for free, so it was rude of her to complain.

Still, our relationship had come a long way since I’d first met her as Lady Agrippina’s retainer. It went without saying that our first battle had not been our last. I didn’t know whether to call him stubborn or daring, but Marquis Donnersmarck had continued to meddle in the madam’s affairs like clockwork, and as their hidden weapons, we’d been forced to follow suit.

No matter how minor the battle, Nakeisha had beelined straight for me whenever a skirmish broke out—probably as retribution for what I’d done to her arms. Fighting me must have given her a hefty load of experience points, because she’d developed new tricks and steadily improved to the point where I struggled to face her one-on-one.

Nowadays, we were so evenly matched that I figured we’d both end up dying in a fair fight.

“Oh, but by the way, Erich,” she said, “this mission happens to be the last on my itinerary.”

On one particular night, we had found ourselves locked in battle for the umpteenth time—a dispute over which region would host the second imperial airport had boiled over, if I recall. We’d each put up a fierce fight, but the circumstances had been dire; it had looked like we were both fated to deal the other a mortal blow.

Yet at the critical moment, she stopped swinging and I lowered my sword. We stood there, glaring at one another...until she offered a proposition. The marquis was positioning himself to cooperate with the count, she’d explained, so perhaps I might be interested in a truce.

And as an afterthought, she’d added, “Besides, I *want* you.”

For all the fiery bloodlust she’d directed at me, I’d never gotten the impression that there had been anything racy between us. How had it come to

this, anyway?

“Are you free after this?” Nakeisha asked.

As if you don’t already know the answer. I nodded without a word.

[Tips] Noble affiliations are a malleable thing: he who poisoned your wine yesterday may offer a toast in your name come tomorrow.

As my hands brought blotches of red forth to the sea of olive pinned below, the alluring hue grew more provocative still. Her usual facade crumbled into a smile, its arc twisting up into a bluish-black patch on her right cheek and interrupted by the ceaseless streak of blood dribbling from her nose. Bright-red hand marks glowed on her neck, joined by more bruises on her stomach and under a right armpit.

I, too, was battered and bruised: all across my back was a vivid impression of the wall I’d been slammed into.

A droplet of crimson splattered onto her jaw and was whisked away into her mouth by a set of mandibles. Evidently, I was bleeding from my forehead as well.

The short of how I’d gotten myself in this sorry state was that the woman below had asked me for it; yet that would be to ignore how sepa as a whole were supposedly so inclined to violence that they treated fistfights as foreplay. It was less than enthusing to get the living dog shit beaten out of me every time we spent the night together. While we had a tacit agreement not to cross the line into breaking bones or tearing joints, that didn’t make the pain any less real.

Actually, looking back, I’d probably crossed the line when I let this whole arrangement arise in the first place.

On that fateful night when Nakeisha had offered a truce and invited me to bed, I’d gone home to seek advice from Margit. Since she’d been with me during our time as normal adventurers, I’d ended up dragging her into this disreputable line of work; she remained my partner both in the public eye and

in the shadows.

Naturally, I'd gone to ask her how to turn the invitation down...but her response had been completely out of the bounds of what I'd expected.

"Don't you think it would be cruel to reject such a passionate request?"

Confused by my companion's indifference, I'd scooped her up and cooed that all I needed was her. Little had I known at the time that *she* had been the one fanning the flames, egging Nakeisha on to ever more radical means in the first place.

And would you look how that turned out!

I mean, I obviously wasn't one to talk, considering how I was the one who'd ultimately taken advantage of the situation, but still. This current Ubiorum-Donnersmarck coalition was only going to last until the critical moment was on the horizon, at which point we'd inevitably scramble to pick one another off behind locked doors again. It was a wonder how anyone could get in the mood with that in mind—she and I both.

The resolve needed to cut down someone with whom you share an intimate relationship is difficult to put to words; that was certainly a failure on my part as a wet worker. Well, at least I knew that Lady Agrippina would factor that into her calculations when she sent me off to do her dirty work.

Our dance of cuts, bruises, and general fatigue lasted until the Night Goddess was nearly back in Her bedchamber. Naturally, we were exhausted and stopped to rest. Puffing on a cigar, I downed a cupful of juice diluted with water—my men were to have a report for me at sunup, and I couldn't afford to drink wine.

Once we'd caught our breaths, I turned to the bed only to see a woman shamelessly flaunting the marks dotting her body.

“Her birthday is coming up soon, isn’t it?” I asked.

“Yes, she’s almost of age.” Nakeisha thought for a moment and added, “The years certainly do fly by.”

Um, well, you know...we were doing *this* sort of thing, so it was only natural it’d turn out this way. Back when the news broke, I’d thought my excuse of reporting that I’d put one of the enemy’s greatest assets out of commission for a few months had been foolproof; yet Lady Agrippina had only given me a half-hearted smirk, and the other multilegged woman in my life had smiled with unknowable intent lurking below.

“Here. It’s a present.”

I did my best to leave personal effects at home when on the job, but I’d seen tonight’s rendezvous coming from the schedule of the operation; besides, if I saw this as a means of gathering intelligence, it was plenty work-related. I hadn’t been allowed to name her, nor had I ever seen her face, but I’d prepared a gift to celebrate my daughter’s birthday.

“Hand it to her, will you?”

All I knew about my daughter was the general window she was born in and that she had my hair and eyes. I didn’t even know her name, much less anything like her favorite food; the most I could do was send her presents to the extent that it wouldn’t interfere with my job.

I figured sending her a weapon would be uncouth—the sepa around her would see that she’d have the best arms anyway—so I always chose something fit for a father to send to his daughter. Today, I’d brought a silver hairpiece. I’d heard she was growing out her hair, and something utilitarian felt perfect for her coming of age.

While I didn’t know whether she actually used any of what I sent her, all that mattered to me was that she knew her father wanted to celebrate that she was born.

That said, it had been a real shock to hear she’d gotten both my recessive traits. As far as I knew, the blood near the Southern Sea was far more likely to be passed along than ours up north.

“I will do just that,” Nakeisha said. “I’m sure she’ll be pleased.”

“You think?”

“Of course. She wears all of the things you’ve sent her so that you’ll know it’s her at first sight.”

Uh... Is that okay with you? I’d given our daughter a sizable number of gifts: rings, necklaces, hairpins, and more. If she was wearing *all* of them, she’d look gaud—uh, rather eye-catching. I knew money couldn’t buy love, but I’d sent her a lot of golds, silvers, and gems in the hope that she’d find them pretty.

As Nakeisha and I parted ways, she left me with words that shook me to my core: “And you know, she’ll be joining me in battle soon.”

I prayed to every god I could think of that I would be spared the fate of becoming the next Hound of Culain...

[Tips] Children born from mensch-like parents tend to exhibit similar patterns of inheritance to the humans of Earth, perhaps because of their similar builds.

The sepa straightened herself out, healed her wounds with mystic ointments, and slunk away from the morning sun toward her closest base.

But then, she felt a premonition of death.

Considering whom she served, this was an ordinary affair. The presence was close: enough so that the only logical explanation was that the troops she’d posted near Erich’s hideout had already been dealt with. As such, Nakeisha walked along as though she was totally unaware—only to whip her trunk behind her when the enemy pounced.

Yet all the sepa’s tremendous kick caught was the crisp air of dawn.

That was bait?! Covering her neck, she whirled back around, but the sheen of metal was already in her face.

However, the shimmer did not belong to a blade ready to end her life; it was a simple silver chalice. Following the arm holding it out to her, the sepa’s gaze

came to rest on an impish, upside-down grin.

Though they were well past thirty, the arachne hanging in the air showed no signs of aging; she, like the golden-haired spy, was one of Nakeisha's greatest rivals.

"You're free to enjoy yourself as you please, but aren't you being a bit careless?"

"It appears I am. Thank you for the warning."

Truth be told, these battles Nakeisha engaged in under the sheets took a greater toll on her body than the vast majority in the field, but she didn't work in an industry where that sort of excuse would hold water. In fact, taking a life in the middle of the act was standard practice; she herself agreed that exhaustion was a pitiful excuse.

The sepa knew she'd lived today because of dumb luck: their current alliance meant that the arachne couldn't see through her hit without causing her employer's plan to crumble. Otherwise, that cup in her hand would have certainly been a dagger.

Owing to her skill set, Margit most often worked separately from Erich to gather information. Yet she was strong enough that when the two linked up on the battlefield, Nakeisha could no longer hold her own; this had truly, truly been a stroke of good fortune.

Dangling from a single thread attached to a nearby roof, the arachne spy cut her lifeline and landed without a sound. Raising the bottle in her other hand, she asked, "Care for another drink? Erich may have business to attend to, but you still have time, don't you?"

"...That doesn't sound bad at all. I have a base nearby, if you'd like to come."

The sepa agent felt like refusing here would be no different from running with her tail tucked; she accepted. It wouldn't take long for her next rotation of lookouts to come across their fallen friends and realize something was off; in which case, she could leave their care to them and do her best to draw intel out of someone she knew would one day be an enemy. And so, the centipede accepted the spider's invitation.

Nakeisha led Margit to a location she wasn't afraid of disclosing—the arachne probably already knew of it anyway—and decided on a cheap inn. She had a permanent room here, borrowed under a false name.

The pair sat across from one another, clinking together their glasses without so much as a snack to chew on. One bore her trademark smile that never faded; the other donned her unchanging poker face.

"This operation certainly has been dreadful," Margit said. "Poor Erich seemed awfully tired from the long undercover mission and all the psychosorcery."

"I'm not too familiar with the technical details, but injecting foreign memories does seem much more distressing than reading a written account."

"It really is. He's experienced enough to retain his sense of self, but it's an arduous process to do away with any lingering effects on his psyche. I suppose I'll have to help him through it again. But for the near future, he'll be spending an hour or two staring into the mirror, I'm sure."

The arachne's amused giggle stood in stark contrast to the sepa's inconcealable jealousy.

On her ear was an old seashell that occasionally clinked against its metal fittings; her neck was hugged tight by a choker and her third finger fitted with a ring, both enchanted with some spell or another. They were a physical pledge of love, given by the man Nakeisha had been pressing her body against just a short while ago.

Meanwhile, the sepa wore nothing of note. Accessories only introduced more weaknesses to exploit—she knew that, but it was enough to feel a breeze run across her skin. She was clad in the same work clothes from last night, wrapped from head to toe and equipped with her trusty chained polearms; yet she felt utterly naked.

The gifts that Erich gave her were always perishable. Whether they were confections from a famous baker or wine made from the juiciest of grapes, he always brought goods to suit her palate and—despite the fact that they were both all but immune to poison—displayed his sincerity by taking the first taste. In all honesty, she couldn't deny that these gifts made her happy.

Yet at times, seeing Margit covered in jewelry that announced “This one is *mine*” drove her to envy beyond her wit’s end.

Earrings were just a hold to rip one’s ear off. Necklaces were just a hold to be strangled with. Rings got in the way of handling weapons, and they could get caught on an opponent’s clothes in close-quarters combat.

Nakeisha knew this. She knew, but she couldn’t help but want all that she could see. At her lowest, she had even caught herself contemplating taking one of her daughter’s presents for her own.

“And the next step of the plan isn’t any better,” Margit sighed. “The details are coming along, and it seems like it’ll all be outside the county, yet *again*. Worse still, some of our targets have gone off to the satellites... I suppose we’ll be on the road once more.”

“Very inconvenient,” Nakeisha agreed. “Especially so, I imagine, with your daughter so young.”

“Honestly!”

On the surface, Nakeisha diligently tried to dig for useful intel; behind her closed lips, however, she gritted her teeth and chittered her mandibles at the thought that she’d lost as a woman.

That the man who had captured her heart—the man she deemed worth killing—wasn’t hers frustrated her like nothing else. She’d both failed to woo him and to cradle his lifeless head; all she could do was watch on as he wandered happily into the spider’s nest of his own accord.

On the other hand, the smiling arachne was hardly any better.

Margit knew that she occupied the superior position. She also knew better than anyone else that it had been her own immoral games that had led to this state of affairs to begin with.

It had all arisen from the arachne urge to boast to the world that she had gotten the best catch: to say that the man she loved, the man who loved *her*, was coveted by all others to the point where they would throw away title and rank just to cling to his feet. The impulses bubbling up within her had been as destructive as they were competitive, and she had failed to hold them back.

Had she not taken this path of blood and instead lived out her days as the huntsman of a countryside canton, she no doubt would have gone a lifetime without becoming so twisted.

Alas, Margit had jumped headfirst into the realm of darkness to stay with her chosen partner—not begrudgingly, but with full enthusiasm. Not wanting to entangle anyone else, Erich continued to lie to his sister that he was a mere adventurer; the same went for his magus and priestess friends. But he had chosen her and her alone to die by his side when the end came, and the choice to accept had been all too easy to make.

But now, he was slowly being taken from her.

Whether the sepa had managed it on purpose or not, it was undeniable that she'd created a sliver in Erich's heart that no longer belonged solely to Margit. Small as it was, the slice was home to a daughter he didn't know and would one day face in battle, and to the woman who had borne her.

They hadn't taken a whole leg; at most, they'd gotten a finger or two. But the arachne hadn't known how much spite she would have for the scavengers picking at her prey until it was too late. What was once a sinful, enjoyable game to her had become burning jealousy.

It was even worse in battle. Setting aside the bliss of being completely and utterly trusted, Margit loathed how fixed Erich's gaze was upon the sepa when they fought. Despite understanding that he only saw her as an enemy to be slain, the passion in his gaze was palpable. Bloodlust was too narrow a term for the raw emotion he showered her with, and at some point along the way, the arachne found herself terribly displeased with it.

If only, Margit thought, *it was something I could share.*

Take the oikodomurge professor: had she shared Erich with them as someone to support together, she would have been happy to welcome the tivisco as a sibling-in-arms.

Or consider the vampire nun: the way she watched her mortal companions was not unlike the gaze Margit cast upon her own child. She was sure she could've let it slide.

And how could she forget his spoiled baby sister? To this day, the arachne could watch her clinging with total composure, because she understood the love that fueled it.

But bloodlust—the urge to kill that Erich showed Nakeisha... That, Margit had never felt. There should have been no reason for her to ever want it, but here she was, envying the sepa with her whole being.

To wish that her beloved would want to kill her was anything but normal, but the thought was sweet music to Margit's ears. Not once had she ever wanted to kill him, but for reasons she couldn't explain, to *be killed* by him sounded enticing.

Part of her chalked it up to the bits of her brain that wanted to be a fairy-tale princess, desired first and foremost in every way by her knight in shining armor. Yet another part of her suspected that there was something more visceral driving her.

In the end, emotions are yours to feel but not yours to control. Where this axiom had once been the source of her fun, it now served to drive the wedge of regret deep in the arachne's mind—an anguish she hid under a pleasant smile.

Just as Nakeisha envied Margit, so too did Margit envy Nakeisha. The two feral women chatted over drinks for a while longer to squeeze out any intel they could, but ultimately came to the same conclusion.

"Well, then," Margit said, "may we get along again for the foreseeable future."

"Yes," Nakeisha said. "As we always do."

Although the two of them had only spoken about trivial topics in roundabout terms, their long tenures as secret agents meant they could glean a few things from instinct alone.

Like, say, when the other was planning to turn coat.

While it was always a given that both sides were looking for a chance to stab the other in the back, it seemed the collapse of their partnership was near. With the first and biggest bust having just finished, only a smattering of guaranteed victories remained. The question from here would be who could

execute them with greater glory and bigger margins.

Or, perhaps, one side would claim everything for themselves. With that in mind, the two women shook hands.

“I hope to meet again soon.” The arachne was all smiles.

“And may you be healthy until then.” The sepa was totally deadpan.

The world was a complicated place, and these were two complicated souls. Fated to cross paths again and again until one of them drew their final breath, they donned opposite expressions, but each swore the same oath.

Next time, you’re dead.

[Tips] Arthropodal demihumans sometimes exhibit behavior that is utterly irrational by mensch standards.

Afterword

First, a word of thanks to my gentle grandmother, who would make cool barley tea every day to stave off the heat of summer.

Next, to my editor, who didn't yell about the submissions made dangerously close to deadline, and who high-rolled on a difficult Negotiation to make one of my dreams come true. And of course, to the wonderful Lansane, for taking my nitpicky requests and delivering illustrations beyond my wildest imaginations. But most of all, to you, the readers who have supported me for long enough to make my grandest hopes a reality.

This makes the seventh afterword I've styled after science fiction authors from abroad. In terms of volumes alone, I'm on par with *The Lord of the Rings* series ('93 edition). The thought that I've caught up to a work that I've read to the point of memorization—that is, if you ignore metrics like units sold or societal acclaim—makes me tremble with emotion.

This has only been possible thanks to your support, your comments, and at times, your gifts. By all means, please feel free to brag at the bar that there's a guy out there who can keep writing his little novels because your purchase has bought me, say, a bowl of ramen.

Silliness aside, it really is thanks to you all that my deepest desires have come true: we have dice! Those of you who prefer e-books or who don't check social media may be scratching your heads, but the preorder bonus for this volume has realized my wildest dreams.

It's dice—dice! As the author of a TRPG-inspired series, I can ask for no greater honor. Not only that, but they have a completely custom design. Similarly to the manga adaptation, I initially brought the idea up with no expectation of being heard out; to think my hopes would be overtaken so impressively!

Better yet, the dice come with a dice *tray* as well. Making her first appearance in four volumes, Margit claims the center of the illustration, ready to embrace the dice rolling into the tray. Isn't this design marvelous?

I can almost hear someone off in the distance asking whether putting the blondie on a die won't curse the thing to only come up with 1s, but that isn't true at all. Move along, citizen: dice are manufactured to extreme degrees of precision, and the one-in-six odds won't be affected just by the symbols making it up. Got it?

Even if you use the dice and end up with 250 extra experience in pity points, crit in the most worthless of spots, or roll into the worst possible encounters, we will take absolutely no responsibility. The issue is entirely with the user's real-life luck. Please roll only after reading the disclaimer statement in full. (This section is to be written in fine print.)

Okay, *admittedly*, when I next find myself having to determine what kind of calamity befalls my labyrinthine kingdom; picking up a forbidden tome as a mage; protecting emblems from the Other in a mind-bending setting; or discovering the fate of my sanity in a world trapped in eternal epilogue...I *might* pull out my usual set of dice. But I promise that the odds are the same one-in-six for each side as any other dice.

As has been reinforced over the course of this series, probability is a metric only fit to be determined at the end of an infinite number of trials. Until then, the statistics may lean in one direction or another, but the odds will ever remain the same. Feel free to use them without worry—please, I insist.

My joy at this arrangement is intensified by all the fond memories I have of dice in general. All the best parts of my college experience were spent with these little knickknacks clattering on tables and deciding my fate. The experiences that gave rise to this humble work of mine were all given life by the outcome of dice, and thinking back to the dimly lit game room I inhabited makes this achievement feel even greater than it already is.

I could go on and on and on about the euphoria of seeing one of the foundational parts of my hobby—the very hobby that inspired this series—brought to life, but in the interest of not using up all my afterword space, I will

leave it at this. May these dice find their way to your hands, ready to spell your fates forevermore.

I'm aware I just touched on having limited space in this section, but the truth is that I've received about ten pages for the afterword this time around. Last volume, I struggled to shave off anything I could, so I began the drafts for this one determined to keep everything neatly organized.

In that process, my editor came to me to say, "I've crunched the numbers, and we'll need about ten pages of material for the afterword. You really don't know how to hold back, do you?"

That makes this one the longest yet, I believe. What is an unwashed plebeian like me meant to talk about for ten whole pages?

Well, I suppose an afterword ought to touch on the main work it's attached to, so humor me while I dance around outright spoilers. While I imagine few are the mavericks who crack open novels and head straight to the afterword, I see no reason not to show them consideration.

In the process of going from an online publication to a serialized work, I've added a great deal of material to two ends: one, to give loyal readers a fresh experience, and two, to make something worth buying for the same price as a particularly fancy bowl of ramen. Those who've read the web novel have surely caught themselves scratching their heads and thinking, "This wasn't in the original!" at points before, but I suspect it'll be all the more common in this work.

As a matter of fact, for the second volume in a row, you may have looked at the front cover and asked yourself, "What? Who is this?"

Who can blame you when ninety-five percent of the book is freshly written? I've given it my all to supply you with a story that is all but completely new, while keeping the thickness of the paperback about equal with the last. I can't say that was the smartest move on my part, but we'll call it a net positive if my plight has been to your enjoyment. The contentment of my readers has more value to me than a one-mana draw-three.

The actual content of what has been added details the string of ridiculous one-off campaigns Erich encounters on his way home. Where the web novel flashed back to a handful of these, they have now been neatly arranged into one story arc.

Back then, I received feedback disappointed at the perceived overuse of arthropods. Consider this an official patch: a new heroine has been added. Note that the balance team's tastes are plain to see in the rebalancing, and, as such, Urza's Tower has also been banned in the name of a better experience.

I kid. I know I'm playing around a lot, but please just laugh it off—I have space to fill. You know, with how many tabletop games revolve around cards, my success in petitioning for dice has gotten me daydreaming about card sleeves. On a tangential note, I once had to double-mulligan four times in a row, two of those being triple mulligans.

Please don't be afraid. Misfortune isn't contagious. No, really, the merchandise is safe to use, I swear.

Getting back on topic, the totally new story comes with the debut of a race that has only been mentioned in passing elsewhere. Horse girls are popular right now, aren't they? If you squint a little, the cover girl is an Umamusume too, kind of. Look, can't we at least give a warm welcome to our first mammalian demihuman?

Until now, most of this series's heroines have had strongly developed personalities—that is, most of them have a solid idea of what their path in life holds. Margit is a ball of unshakable resolve, and for all their whimsy, the alfar are rigid in their ways. Mika has their future laid out before them, Cecilia is devout in her faith, and Nakeisha is a loyal agent from head to tail. Of them all, perhaps the only one still formative is Elisa; yet she, too, has grown into a full character in her own right as she's found the determination to pursue her goals in earnest.

Maybe this is simply what you get when you have a hero who *can* do anything but ends up merrily choosing to throw himself into harm's way. Birds of a

feather, as they say. To be honest, I can't envision a normal girl being able to keep up with our golden boy.

But into this mix comes Dietrich, who is much less grounded in comparison. Despite having the strength to be a warrior, she lacks a vision for what she might become; despite being physically mature, she isn't quite an adult. With Elisa's arc finished for the time being, I wanted to take the opportunity to dial in on the idea of growing up as a person.

Initially, I'd conceived of her as a sort of class clown, but the end result is as you see in the work. Everyone else was too well put together with clearly defined ambitions for me to portray the struggles of naive soul-searching until now. Mika's struggle was close, but ultimately not rooted in their own immaturity.

All this to say, the new addition isn't just to add a new girl, but to give me an avenue to write in ideas I wanted to cover. As someone who went through the same struggles in my youth, the desire for recognition without knowing what for has been on my mind for some time.

And, at long last, Margit has made her return. It truly has been a long journey. I'm not sure if leaving the cover girl of the first volume to sit for four whole volumes was quite my cleverest moment, but I wanted to emphasize the depth of an everlasting faith and love overcoming barriers of time and distance.

From the next volume on, not only will the arachne get plenty of screen time, but the main premise of going on an adventure will finally come to fruition! I promise to make it interesting, so I ask that you please share your thoughts, comments, and reviews to keep the publication going. Please!

By the time you all are reading this, I suspect progress on the manga adaptation will be chugging along, and I'd love for you to read that as well. I can't announce anything yet as I write this in June, but I'm sure the serialization date will be set in stone by the time this afterword is released. Boy, am I glad we made the spring deadline! (I am currently in talks with Overlap Inc. to adopt the *FGO* system of seasonal measurement, wherein spring lasts until August, as

company standard.)

Lansane's wonderful designs need no introduction, but the mangaka Uchida Temo has done a splendid job drawing arthropods too, not even to mention their patience with my quibbling requests when reviewing the rough drafts. Seeing the adaptation in all its glory has moved me, and I'd like for you to feel the same; if you have any interest, please read the manga when it releases.

The pandemic may not be over, but with the ebb of danger, I've managed to get my hands on a new space I can share with others; I hope to play some tabletop games again soon. I pray for the day when I'll be able to roll these dream-come-true dice without any restrictions at all.

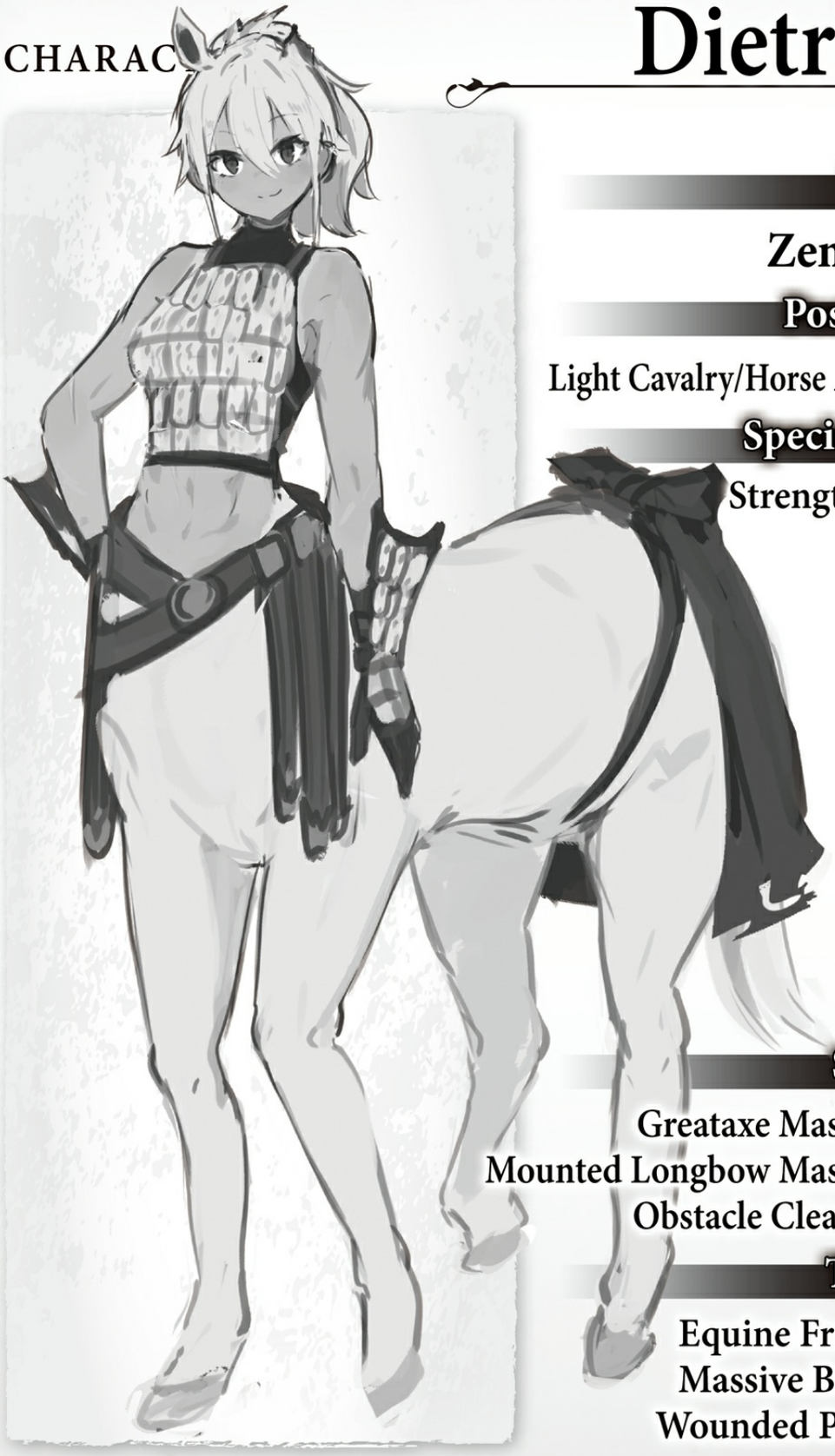
This is especially pertinent with how Little Miss Reiwa must not have gotten the memo from Mister Heisei on what acceptable summer heat should be like. May we all keep ourselves and others safe, but while staying cool enough to avoid heatstroke. Surely the weather won't last; Old Man Showa will come out hollering if this goes on any longer.

With all that said, I pray we might meet again in the seventh volume.

[Tips] The author uploads side stories and world-building details to @Schuld3157 on Twitter as "extra replays" and "rule book fragments."

New Marg it

CHARAC



Name

Dietrich

Race

Zentaur

Position

Light Cavalry/Horse Archer

Specialties

Strength VII

Skills

Greataxe Mastery ◆
Mounted Longbow Mastery ◆
Obstacle Clearing ◆

Traits

Equine Frame ◆
Massive Build ◆
Wounded Pride ◆

Bonus Short Stories

What Is Asked of a Garment?

Layer after layer of cloth rolled onto the table, drawing an ecstatic squeal from the wraith professor at one end.

“Oh! Every single one is so wonderful! If only we could use them all!”

Across from her, a young changeling and student-to-be made every effort to remain calm. Had this been her old self, her face would have scrunched up with beads of sweat streaking across it—that was how uncomfortable this occasion was to her.

“The gods must be truly heartless to ask me to pick only one. Why don’t we simply have you change dresses throughout the night to debut in more outfits?!”

“P-Pardon me, Great-Master. I think my master would be rather upset if we did that.”

Packed as the College was with eccentrics and cranks, Magdalena von Leizniz was singularly unique. Today, she stood before a lively collection of designs each detailing a front, back, and side profile, all made to adorn a little girl to be as pretty as could be.

Every single design had been drafted by crown jewels of the fashion world: some of the oldest money in the capital was willing to wait a decade to commission their work. Yet Lady Leizniz, as a longtime patron and the first to preach of their talents, could mobilize them in shockingly quick fashion—though perhaps not as shocking as the budget she had allotted for the project.

The task at hand was to make something for the young Elisa to wear at her official enrollment-cum-debut. Just from a glance, the girl could tell that the eastern velvets and satins and the southern silks sprawled out before her could feed a rural family for three generations; that was to say nothing of the

handwoven lacework and gems slated to adorn their final forms. Factoring in the cost of design and construction, the total price exceeded her capacity to imagine.

“Goodness, that disciple of mine truly understands nothing of the finer things in life! Preparing an apprentice’s formal debut should take all one’s attention and more. How can she live with herself, not even showing up to help select your dress?!”

“Um, but this isn’t an imperial wedding or anything so grand. I don’t think I’ll need more than one outfit.”

Although her brother had brought along a patron who would merrily sign off on any expense, Elisa couldn’t overcome her pause. Besides, the designs had all been drawn up to suit Lady Leizniz’s inclinations: that is to say, they were far too mature for a girl still a ways out from her second decade. Had her brother been present, the gloves as long as a grown noblewoman’s and drooping veils to obscure her face would have gotten him to consider an anonymous tip-off to the closest church.

“Mm... Well, you’ll need everyday clothes anyhow, so we shall order at least five or six sets. But still, to narrow that down to one for your debut... Oh, how vexing!”

Nobles were not to show their emotions on their sleeves, but evidently, moral dissolution outweighed classist pride; the professor took the documents in hand, poring over them with just as much interest as she brought to thaumaturgic treatises, if not more.

Having grown much in the past few years, Elisa instinctively recognized that things were sure to get out of hand if she left the woman to her devices. Hurriedly, the girl reached over to sift through the papers herself; she needed to find the least objectionable outfit she could while the wraith was busy squealing and making herself more transparent. To this end, Elisa steeled herself against her peasant instincts. Any attempt to deny wanton luxury would be vetoed with the dubious excuse that it was fine for a professor to spoil her great-apprentice.

“Look, how about this?!”

“That may be a touch conspicuous for me.”

In her heart, the changeling wondered why she would ever be recommended something fit for a royal bride; on the surface, though, she managed to turn the suggestion down with a smile.

Suddenly, a single design caught her eye. Amidst the sea of novel and ostentatious concept pieces was one relatively simple sketch: a robe. Though its sleeves were tapered off into cuffs and the hem went down to a traditional length, the garment managed to remain cute. Hoods were prone to looking dull and unrefined, but this design sectioned its hood away to a small shoulder-length cape to minimize its overall effect.

The robe was both charmingly girly and the spitting image of a mage; it captured Elisa’s heart in an instant.

“Are you sure you want *this* one? Isn’t it a tad...drab?”

A great deal of embroidery embellished the collar and every edge, and Elisa’s master Agrippina would surely add more in the form of protective enchantments; the final product would be far from what anyone could consider drab. The young student-to-be insisted that this was the one.

“If Dear Brother—oh! Excuse me. If Brother Dearest is to see me wearing today’s order, I’d like to show him that I’ll do just fine as a student. And this looks like something a magus would wear.”

Elisa firmly stated her mind. But not a moment after, she became worried: the woman she’d spoken back to was her master’s master—nominal though the relationship was—and the dean of her school. What if her insistence upset Lady Leizniz?

The next instant, the girl discovered her fears were unfounded.

Hands covering her mouth, the undead dean somehow managed to wet her eyes as she trembled with emotion. Eventually, she could contain her elation no longer.

“So! Precious!”

And so, Elisa got to pick her debut outfit without a hitch.

Looking at the schedule, it was anyone's guess as to whether the robe would be finished by the time her brother left the capital, but Elisa held onto hope: she wanted him to see how hard she was trying to grow up. With an unspoken prayer, she hugged the design tight.

[Tips] A College student's debut is ordinarily an opportunity for their master to introduce them to friendly professors and researchers. However, particularly powerful magia may instead host larger galas and invite non-Collegiate nobles or members of other cadres.

Write an Essay on the Psychological Effects of Biological Shifts in Sex. (5 pts.)

Opening a small wardrobe containing a handful of clothes, a student plucked one garment out without much thought. It was a robe: simple yet classy, and the perfect indicator of its wearer's student credentials. Next came a pair of pants to hedge against an upturned hem; two half boots fit for fieldwork; and, as perhaps the only statement piece to note, a belt to tighten the baggy clothes at the hip so as not to create an unflattering contour.

"Perfect."

In a room full of cheap furniture, the lone symbol of wealth was a large mirror —a gift from her master. He'd given her a hand mirror too; both served as unspoken reminders that anyone who wished to claim the title of magus needed to look the part. Theirs was an institution where pointing out a fleck of dirt on an ankle-length robe was the highest degree of disparagement, and he didn't want his disciple suffering that shame.

Ever elegant; ever beautiful; ever neat. For a class of bureaucrats so often judged on merit alone, appearance was one of the few avenues of performance they had to prove their sociability. Confirming that hers was up to par, the student stuffed her wand and school supplies into a bag and put her home in the low quarter behind her.

The Mages' Corridor was lined with a number of dormitories rented out to

the promising yet poor talent that migrated in from the countryside. Built to suit the price, these student housing units were less than luxurious, as if to compel their residents to study harder in order to escape this miserable lifestyle. The rooms were cramped and the mess hall—which was only open on working days—could hardly be considered fine dining, even if it served enough to fill an empty belly.

Yet the magus hopeful wanted for little here. After all, her home had been much the same; rather, the simple fact that she didn't get snowed in for a whole season at a time every year was enough to consider this comfortable living. So while she remained fixed on her goal of ascending to magushood in the future, the relative poverty of the present weighed on her little.

Though, as she walked through town, there was *one* thing on her mind.

For you see, the young student's name was Mika, and she was a tivisco. She and her kind bounced from male to female with agender periods sandwiched in between; now in her feminine state, her sensibilities had shifted to match. Show windows had begun to gain popularity in the city as of late, and the reflection of a plainly dressed girl staring back at her in the glass gave her something to think about.

Here she was without the faintest touch of rouge or a single ornament to adorn her hair. Would she be better off polishing her looks like everyone else her age?

Recently, her classmates had begun spending great amounts of time and effort on looking nicer: they were at that curious age, after all. Dressing up handsomely or cutely to catch another's eye was a simple matter of course.

This being the Mages' Corridor, the show window Mika was staring into belonged to a mage's shop. Hair accessories made from flowers that would never wilt were lined up next to necklaces with minor enchantments.

A blooming white lily caught the girl's eye: it would suit her friend perfectly, she thought.

This friend was a boy, but his limbs were lithe and his features a touch tender: the lily would fit brilliantly. Although he wasn't delicate per se—there was also a bit of prickly strength and virility about him—he looked at his best in sleek

aristocrat-adjacent clothes.

I wonder how he'd react if I put this flower in his hair, the student thought with a goofy smile. *I bet he'd pout and say, "Come on, who do you think I am?"*

Catching a glimpse of herself grinning in the glass, an offhand thought paid her a visit. Was it because the hairpiece on the other side had lined up with her reflection? Or was it perhaps a gendered flight of fancy brought on by her current state?

Whatever the impetus may be, her mind drifted to daydream: *What if* he *put it in* my *hair?*

There he was: her friend—her best friend in the whole world—standing before her with a beaming smile and the lily in hand. He was close enough to put the ornament in her hair, maybe a fist's width away at most. His gentle smile was so close that the breaths she took in were the ones he let out.

Finally, he raised his hand. Knowing him, he wouldn't use a brush: yes, he ran his fingers through her hair like he just meant to comb it, enjoying the feeling of the smooth raven waves. Her locks fluttered, carrying the scent of her hair to him, and then...and then!

As the fantasy reached its terminus, the girl in the glass exploded into a bright red puff—and of course, so too did the student causing the reflection. Realizing how honeyed a situation she'd conjured, the blushing girl quickly turned away from the shop window.

"C-Calm down... I'm not like the people in class!"

Mumbling to reassure herself, the student hurried off toward Krahenschanze. Yet even as the cool autumn breeze danced across her face, it would take some time for the scarlet in her cheeks to fade.

[Tips] Smart dress is a courtesy in high society.

Blood and Matrimony

For the privileged, marriage was a ritual of great pomp and ceremony. With

whole clans taking part, any given wedding was liable to be held in the capital, then again at the couple's new personal estate, and then *again* at a lavishly decorated church.

But for the everyday pair, nuptials were something to be performed alongside others just like themselves, and Berylin was no exception to the rule. Every season, the parishes of the city put aside time to hold mass weddings for their devotees.

Whereas countryside cantons were given only a single ceremony in the autumn, urban populations required more regular events to not overwhelm the organizers with a backlog of unwed couples. Better funded than their rural counterparts, the clergy of the city made it a point to host at least one every few months.

As a rule of thumb, prospective newlyweds tended to be sworn in under either the god they truly worshiped or the one that looked to offer the most benefit. Popular picks founded in the second reason included the Sun God, for his place as the heavens' first-ever husband, and the Harvest Goddess, who oversaw childbirth.

Yet arguably the most prominent was the patron saint of maidenhood, the pinnacle of loving motherhood, and the other half of the first divine pair: the Night Goddess. Chaste and just, a loving wife and a wise mother—the Night Goddess enjoyed zealous popularity among the women of the nation. When the time came for lay folk to marry, the only temples that could claim to rival the popularity of Hers were the Harvest Goddess's.

For any woman hoping to live out her days in a sound and healthy relationship, the strength Mother Night displayed in rebuking Her husband for wrongdoing was sure to strike a chord. Though the Age of Gods had passed and She no longer smote adulterous men where they stood, Her blessing remained perennially welcome; no matter the era, the worries of a married couple were sure to stay the same.

Today, as with any day of matrimony, the Mother Goddess's temple was full of men and women dreaming about the next step of their futures. The main hall of the Great Chapel was open to the public on this special occasion, and as a

rare indulgence, the cleansing fragrance of incense wafted through the air. In the center of the hall, Her marble visage was decorated with all the flowers that had been brought in honor of the occasion. Although it was far from flashy, the atmosphere had a palpably celebratory texture to it.

The usual pews had been removed to facilitate the presence of all the couples and their families. Merry participants crowded into the open space, amazed by the splendor of it all—something truly foreign to their daily lives. Near the walls, the Goddess's servants watched on as the ceremony began.

"Quiet, please."

Amplified by way of miracle, the Head Abbess's voice carried to the back of the room. As it did, a wave of silence overwrote the assembly's oohs and aahs.

On a podium in front of the altar stood the head of the congregation, flanked by other high-ranking church officials; their expressions were invariably soft, welcoming smiles. Being a goblin, the Head Abbess required an extra stool to compensate for her height; yet her dignified manner preemptively expelled any notion of silliness.

"We are joined here today to offer the Night Goddess our prayers that She may bless those newly wed, but also to ask: What is a husband? What is a wife? Here I shall lay out Her answer for you to behold."

Subdued yet clear, the abbess's sermon began to fill the hall.

Off in one wing, a vampire stood against the wall with her fellow nuns and smiled: weddings were always wonderful, no matter how many times she saw them. Though her expression was usually frozen in a state of sobriety, these sorts of unabashedly happy occasions gave her free rein to pull off the mask and let her emotions show.

I wonder what sort of life they'll live together? Cecilia thought, lovingly watching over each pair. For some, the groom seemed nervous; for others, the bride was tightly clenched; for others still, both halves of the pair were anxiously frozen up. But on the other hand, many wore the blissful smiles of couples unafraid of whatever the future had in store. No matter whom she looked at, though, the priestess felt blessed to see that all had arrived anticipating the day.

Of all the lovers, Cecilia's eyes came to rest on one pair in particular.

The groom was a younger boy who, being a commoner, had grown out hair that reminded her of a similar set of locks in a similar hue of gold; the bride was a girl sporting just about the same hairstyle as herself. In a peculiar coincidence, the pair lined up together at the same heights as the priestess and her friend.

The boy squeezed his sweetheart's trembling hand to calm her down. Before she knew it, the vampire had begun imagining herself in their shoes. Strangely enough, the fantasy came with a mysterious sense of contentment. That said, she knew it was impossible and banished the thought from her head.

The boy was mortal. By the time she came of age, he would be rushing past sixty. Time was a commodity doled out to all equally, but the rate of return was incomparable.

Tilting her head at the slightest of angles, the nun wondered why her mind had wandered like that—when she noticed her fangs extending into her mouth uninvited.

Although she moved her lips so as not to let the jagged teeth show, the sharp points prodding at her tongue tickled her heart and dragged up a vivid recollection of sweet, mind-numbing blood. She'd lost herself then, lapping the final drops up like a vulgar barbarian; yet the memory filled her mouth with drool.

Bearing such thoughts in the middle of a day as happy as this troubled the priestess beyond expression, and she could do nothing but wait for the mental outburst to fade. Her beloved student-turned-boss's preaching went in one ear and out the other as she stood at the mercy of the past's unchanging history; the unforgettable aftertaste of blood still dancing on her tongue, the nun held back a dreadful shiver.

[Tips] Church affiliates do not marry in mass weddings. Instead, their monasteries will wed them to their partners individually.

An Oath to Perfection

In the northern section of Berylin, surrounded by noble estates and luxury shops, lay one store known as the Nameless Clothier's.

With white walls and fanciful blue bricks, the beautiful building blended into the scenery. The only signifier that it dealt in the business of fashion was a single sign depicting a spindle and tambour; the store lacked the large front windows that had become normalized in recent years, and didn't have so much as a name out front. Its exterior was a plain statement that the uninvited were also unwelcome.

Perhaps that was an imprecise statement. In truth, there was only one person truly welcome here: she for whom this entire establishment had been built.

The upper class started their days later than those below, and as such, the store had yet to open to match its clientele. As the sun lurched over the horizon at early dawn, a lone methuselah quietly prepared for the day ahead.

She was the proprietress of the store. One of her regulars—a little blond boy—was under the impression that all the tailors working here cast their allegiance not with her, but with her patron; yet the truth was that the methuselah was the owner of the business. In fact, she was also the only person who worked here: the other seamstresses belonged to large, famous brands around the city and came by only when they were needed.

After confirming the placement of her classy interior decor and ensuring that not a speck of dust could be seen in her store, the woman sat in her working chair without a sound. Innumerable needles poked out from her pincushion, and a vibrant collection of colors was starting to take the shape of clothing on the table in front of her.

Originally, this store had been founded solely as a means of facilitating the woman's own hobby—which was precisely why it had become so highly esteemed. Furthermore, her most loyal customer was none other than *the* Magdalena von Leizniz, whose love of finery (though not necessarily her own) needed no introduction in noble spheres.

To wear goods of the same make as an established connoisseur was, in and of itself, a powerful statement in high society. Many came to put in an order just for the gossip it would produce around themselves.

Of those countless orders, most were tossed: the methuselah only bothered to work on things outside her realm of interest if her investor Lady Leizniz put in a word to that effect. The half-finished garment on her desk was one such article.

Letting out a sigh, the seamstress brushed against her needles with a magic touch. They sprang to life, diving into the fabric with trails of thread. The whole project floated into the air, layering itself on the outline of a holographic ballroom gown—her mystic rough draft.

Dozens of needles zipped around, transforming the piece from cloth cut to shape to a proper dress in less than an hour. The embroidery was detail incarnate, and the country's finest tailors would have been happy to ship an order of this sort; yet the woman who'd pulled off this incredible feat looked positively miserable.

"What dreary work..."

She could pick and choose her projects, but it was not so easy to do the same with clients. This stately gown may have been breathtaking, but knowing that it would be put over a buyer who had nothing more than peerage meant it failed to elicit any emotional response.

Oh, I long for something exciting.

"Morniiing!"

Another woman slipped in from the back door. The gnoll was another seamstress who usually worked for a company that brought its business straight to the doors of the privileged. It was as famous as it was luxurious: only the richest of nobles could afford to call master tailors straight to them.

"Wow, you sure are at it early, Mistress."

"Of course I am—I live upstairs." Suddenly pausing to think, the proprietress asked, "Was it today?"

"Ha ha!" Though this was a cute giggle by gnoll standards, a mensch would have been terrified by her sharp hyena-like laugh. "Aw, you don't have to pretend, Mistress. As if a methuselah would ever forget."

I wasn't pretending, the proprietress thought to herself.

True, methuselah were a people alien to the concept of forgetfulness; however, there were still times when an idea might slip their minds. There was a world of difference between failing to recall and not bothering to.

For a methuselah to devote her life to clothing made her an oddity even amongst her kind. She spent her days filling her head with all the unmade designs that she might one day make; plans and schedules often found their way out of her consciousness.

"I'm really looking forward to this. What kind of request do you think Lady Leizniz'll bring today?"

"As am I. And whatever it is, I'm sure it will be simply inspiring. Lately I've been smitten with that one child. You know, the one who came with the blond boy."

"Oh, the College student! I love them too, especially when they have that listless look on their face! Gosh, that master-servant role-play was *sooo* cute!"

Yet the gnoll's euphoria contrasted harshly against the methuselah's vicious glare.

"Excuse me? That child is at their best when happily frolicking around with the blond boy."

"Excuse *me*? Have you filled in your eye sockets with marbles, Mistress? The young prince, driven to despair by a marriage he doth not want, and his loyal butler who helpeth him to find his path forward—come on! How can you not understand perfection when you see it?"

"How kind of you to fret over my vision. May I extend the same courtesy to you by recommending a pair of spectacles? Our lady brought the pair here together upon seeing them being merry in the marketplace. Or are you saying the beauty of friendship blossoming from the two competing ends of a love triangle is too much for you to comprehend?"

"Aw, I guess you don't get it. I'm not saying that their smile isn't great too, but that clouded expression when they're thinking is just the best."

“I’m afraid you are the one who doesn’t understand. That sunny smile they show when playing with the blond boy is simply too good to put to words.”

“Wow, it sure is lively in here!”

As the pair got into their heated debate, seamstress after seamstress filed in from the back entrance. Lady Leizniz was coming today, so they’d all abandoned their posts at their real jobs—to be fair, this was more “real” to most of them in terms of both motivation and pay—in order to show face.

“Umm, for me...I like it when she’s a girl. Like, they *both* have one-sided crushes... The young lady asks her butler how her new evening gown looks. He answers like a good servant. But she really only wanted to show him. But she can’t, so she tries to at least give him the first look, and...ugh!”

“Trashy! Love, better is tragedy! Eh, butler go off with maid!”

“No way, now *your* scenario is trashy. Besides, I think unrequited love hits harder if it’s on the boy’s end anyway. The lady is attacked, but the butler saves her! Oh, but he’s mortally wounded—and as the end approaches, the truth comes flooding forth!”

“All you tragedy-lovers fail to see deeper than the surface. What the world truly desires is a happy ending. Do you remember that knight outfit that we made for the boy with golden hair? Imagine he comes for the princess’s hand looking like *that*.”

“That’s still too shallow! None of you are seeing the *truth*: the raven-haired child is wonderful precisely because they’re tivisco! You’re missing the oscillations between friendship and romance, the dissonance between desire and sexlessness... Don’t you see?!”

The discussion grew more heated with every new entrance. It was evident that Lady Leizniz hadn’t personally selected these women without reason. In fact, that much was plain to see in how they were all free to speak without an ounce of reserve; these weren’t employees at a store the dean liked to shop at, but sisters-in-arms pursuing the same end goals.

On a fundamental level, that was why they worked here. It wasn’t the extravagant pay or minimal working hours, nor was it the ambition to sell their

names by associating with one of the most revered establishments in high society.

No, they simply loved creating beauty with their own hands and had taken Lady Leizniz's hand to further pursue that delight.

"Speaking of gloomy expressions, I think they suit the blond boy better. Ugh, I wanna see him sad. Not, like, in a tragic situation, but just looking heartbroken in an all-black outfit."

"I am understanding! He's butler, goes to master's funeral with single streak tear!"

"Hrm, I suppose I can see your point. But the boy makes for a wonderful solo model as well. I'd like to put him in a soldier's uniform and really accentuate the manliness of a knight ready to march for the front lines."

"I'd like to go the other direction...and dress him up as a girl. He's been growing lately, but we can hide his neck with a tall enough collar, and his shoulders wouldn't look so broad if we puffed up the bits around them. I know our lady prefers when cross-dressing is recognizable at first glance, but I'm quite partial to scenarios wherein a boy must hide his identity and truly play the part..."

"Squee! That's beautiful! Wonderful! Oh, I completely understand!"

"Hmm... But what of the theme? A bridal dress? Or perhaps a widow's mourning dress?"

"No, no, no—it *must* be a luncheon dress! Imagine: a storied noble house must produce a bride, but they have no daughters. Instead, they send off a son dressed as a girl...only to find that his fiancé is a girl dressed as a boy!"

"Eek! Perfect!"

"Wait, hold on! How about, instead, he gets to know his 'groom' as a boy first, and they grow closer and closer until he starts to question what the emotions in his heart really are?!"

"Both! Eh, the girl also!"

If the subjects of this discussion were to overhear its contents, one would

reach for his sword and the other would try—albeit not very enthusiastically—to stop him.

Of the dean's favored children, some enjoyed being prettied up and fawned on; but those two were, relatively speaking, rather normal in the head. If nothing else, the seamstresses all understood why the pair made those gloomy expressions when they looked at themselves in the mirror.

Yet their and their patron's hobbies came first. Whether they truly understood the depths of their sin was dubious.

"Oh, I love those two, but I really do wish we could pair them up with some of the others. I know our lady is only respecting their boundaries, but if only we could line all of the children up together!"

"I doubt that day will ever come, sadly. I asked her once before, and Lady Leizniz said that she didn't want to introduce them to her noble apprentices for fear that both sides would shrink away."

"Disappoint, but yes, our lady's wish is for most important!"

"It really is a shame, but she knows best."

The boisterous discussions went on and on—that the women's hands remained always busy was proof of their skill—until the proprietress looked out at the angle of the sun and judged that the time was nigh.

Clapping her hands, she said, "To chit and chat is well and good, but Lady Leizniz shall soon arrive. Our preparations must be perfect. Be ready to exceed expectations no matter what she brings us: I am not so kind as to overlook poor performance in the face of excessive play."

"Yes, Mistress," the crew answered.

Zipping their mouths, the clothiers worked at full speed. No matter what their patron had in store, the overwhelming array of fabrics, threads, and tools they lined up would be enough to do the job. Knowing the dean's preferences, they brought out a kaleidoscope's worth of colors in velvet and satin; make no mistake, though, for they did not shy away from an array of more traditional silks.

Rather, they went so far as to prepare flax and cotton—materials thought unfit to be kept in stock at an establishment as fine as this—in the event that their lady wished for more common clothes. Trends in high society were ever unpredictable—who knew? If a particularly stunning lady attended a ball with a dress made of cheap material to great effect, perhaps others would follow suit. Those gathered in this shop were not incompetent enough to cast perfectly good cloth aside due to perceived class alone.

With a board of samples ready in case they needed to put in an order for rarer colors, the team finished their preparations. They waited with bated breath to see what kind of perfection would walk through the door this time.

“Good morning, everyone! I have some truly wonderful designs to share with you today! Oh, my designers are just marvelous!”

The wraith only ever sent a note on the date of her arrival and unceremoniously slipped through the wall when the time came. Yet her usual needleworkers had gotten a hunch, and their greeting was picture perfect. Lined up in formation, they curtsied with good grace.

“Your arrival is our greatest pleasure, von Leizniz,” the methuselah led.

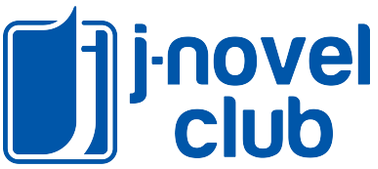
“Welcome, von Leizniz,” the rest followed.

“Thank you! Now that we have that out of the way, let’s enjoy ourselves!”

Undead as she was, Lady Leizniz beamed with life. Trailing behind her were a blond boy who had clearly not slept in days and a raven-haired boy worrying about the other’s health.

A few of the seamstresses were visibly excited to see the tivisco in his male state, while a few others seemed disappointed. Although their emotions were scattered, their hearts were together: the curtains rose on yet another Sabbath hosted by the wraith and her followers.

[Tips] Practically all noble clothing is made to order. As such, the capital has many high-end tailor shops to meet the demand.



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Min-Maxing My TRPG Build in Another World: Volume 6

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