Min-Maxing My TRPG Build in Another World

Preach the Good Word of Mr. Henderson

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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.

9

Canto I

Margit
A shock went through my brain
and my body tightened in response.
I felt something *wet*.
Margit. Was. Licking. My. Ear.
“Bad boys who have lost their vim
need to be given a little extra lesson.”
Erich

"So don't you be worryin' about it.
We both chose Marsheim,
so let's get along, y'hear?"
Schnee
Schnee
and Mathieu
really were perfect
exemplars of that cat
and dog idiom from
my old world.

“Siegfried, stay there and watch my back!”
“Got it!”
Siegfried

The Henderson Scale

−9: Everything is as it should be and everyone enjoys a happy end to end all happy ends.

-1: The dragon is slain, the princess is saved, and the adventurers raise up a toast at the pub.

0: For better or for worse, things go according to the GM and players' plans.

0.5: A tangent impacts the main story.
E.g. "Wow, there's a lot of us today. Hm, what? A death game? I thought this was just a typical high school setting?"

0.75: A minor storyline takes the place of the main plot.
E.g. "Huh, y'know, we kind of have an edge over your average death game cast—we all actually *like* each other..."

1.0: Some fatal mistake prevents the true ending from ever coming to fruition.
E.g. "Oh, for real? This is an 'only one person gets out' kind of deal? Come on, GM, that's not nice... Hm?"

1.25: The GM condemns his players but tries to figure out how to continue in their next session.
E.g. "PC1's got a pretty high INT in real life. Apparently they've figured out a way to blow the death game wide open without breaking a single rule..."

1.5: The party intentionally wipes.
E.g. "The GM was about to break down crying because no one's killing each other, and PC4 felt so bad about it that he was going to kill himself just to smooth things over... Luckily we managed to talk him down."

1.75: The players commit genocide or otherwise move to bring the setting to its knees. The GM silently shuts his screen.
E.g. "I was kind of freaking out at first because the GM did a really good job not telegraphing the whole genre shift, but you know our GM—there's always some little thing they weren't prepared for us to do. We thought they were saying 'deathscape,' but maybe they were saying 'escape'? Right, let's find a hole and rip right through it!"

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. "We sniffed out all the holes and contradictions in your death game, plus all the metaphors, allusions, and wordplay you used to shore it up; we teamed up to taunt the mastermind who'd put us all through this living hell in the first place until he broke down crying and confessed; and then all our PCs went to a diner for a campaign wrap party. Um, what was the point of this, GM...?"

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CHARACTER

Name

Schnee

Race

Bubastisian

Position

Connection

Specialties

Agility VIII

Skills

- Stealthy Movement (Urban)
- Master of Disguise
- Bubastisian

Traits

- Fellow Cat
- Quiet as a Cat
- Paragon of Truth

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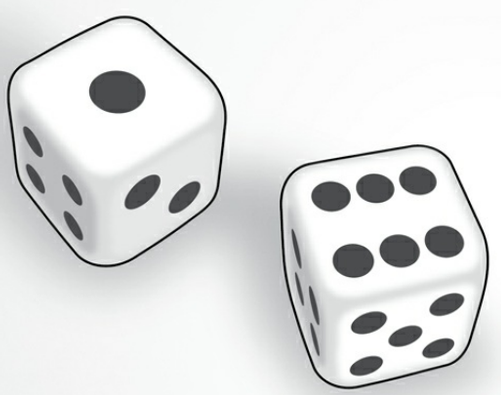


Preface

Tabletop Role-Playing Game (TRPG)

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

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

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

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

As he pondered for the umpteenth time that day what series of events had led to his good fortune, the poet took his first sip of wine to quench his overused, parched throat—it tasted incredible.

The song he had played in full today had originally been planned to be spread out over multiple days. Not only had this medley rendered his throat red and raw, the original writer had written fiendishly difficult passages, almost as if to mock whomever might attempt to perform it, that had tested his mettle. The strings had left painful grooves in the tips of the fingers on his left hand, and a few nails on his right had begun to peel off.

He doubted that the wonderful taste of this wine came simply from the relief that came in the wake of pushing one's body to its limits.

"Mmm, this is fantastic. My throat feels like the fields after the first rains at the end of a long drought... Perhaps I've won the God of Music's favor?"

The white wine was perfectly refreshing—a sweetness remained on his lips without overstaying its welcome. The fragrance of the grapes had tickled his

tongue before evaporating, the nectar-like aftertaste fading perfectly away like powder snow. It was a delicacy unfit for a poet used to scraping by on pocket change from idle chores with the caravan.

As he took another sip, he suddenly recalled the teachings of his old master: the gods reward a satisfying performance by making the first drink taste like sweet nectar. His master was a pious sort and remembered all the teachings of the old days. Each nugget of wisdom he had imparted had always seemed stuffy and outdated, and so the poet had never made an effort to retain them, but perhaps there was some truth in them after all. After all, this second sip he had just taken—chasing that ambrosial first gulp—tasted like a delicious wine; nothing more, nothing less.

"Good, right? Take it as thanks for your performance today."

The older gentleman gave an oddly generous smile as he poured another glass.

"It's delicious. I bet Goldilocks enjoyed something equally satisfying after his own battle."

The poet couldn't bring himself to share the god's bounty that he had tasted just now. The fact that this was a pleasure to him and him alone made the nectar that much sweeter. The finest future he could envision was to tell of this day, with pride in his chest, to the next generation of poets.

He glanced at his hand clasping the cup. It would probably take a while for the nails on his throbbing fingertips to heal. He would have to hold off on practicing for a while, and he doubted whether he would even be able to perform at the next canton, but that was fine when the wine tasted *this* good.

His satisfaction didn't end there—he felt a swelling joy in his chest that he had risen in the caravan's estimation after stealing away the crowd. The people of Konigstuhl were in high spirits and had invited everyone in the caravan to join in the festivities.

It was as if a second spring festival had come; locals and travelers alike wore the same smiles. Exquisite dishes passed from hand to hand, and the liquor flowed free and easy. In all the depth and breadth of the Empire, there was no one within who would air a complaint at this scene.

The poet snapped out of his reverie—reflecting again on how this day was truly something unexpected—and pulled out his notepad. It was a personal thing, full of not just the lyrics and scores from other poets he had met in his travels, but also his own ideas in preparation for the day when he would pen and release his own original song. It was a tool of the trade that he valued almost as much as his own life.

After cheerfully passing him another drink that was sure to go down well, the older gentlemen clasped the poet's hands and said with heartfelt emotion, "Thank you for delivering my son's tale to us."

Aha. So this man is our hero's father—he does *seem a mite too tough to be any ordinary farmer.* In other words, he had a whole bunch of stories that no other poet in the world could possibly know.

Part of being a performer was using your own poetic sense and knowledge to vary up or add bits to a song and make it your own. He hadn't yet found an audience that didn't enjoy a taste of something personal about the hero—especially if it came from their youth.

The poet had never even met Goldilocks Erich, yet here he stood with a direct line to precious, precious source material. The caravan's circuit would bear them out west. If he was lucky, there would be yet more to learn in the vicinity of Marsheim. This research would put his own unique footprint on the story and bring it to even greater heights. Most poets did their own "pilgrimages"—a tongue-in-cheek title for their research trips—but none had yet come to Konigstuhl. It was sure to elevate his status as a poet—practically a blessing from on high.

If things went well—a big if, mind—then he'd be able to foster a personal connection with the family of a hero from the scene's absolute bleeding edge. What better way to embellish and lend depth to the work than with the testimony of a primary source? It was a surefire ticket to popularity with his audiences to come.

As soon as he mentioned that he wanted to hear a few tales about Erich's childhood, a throng of eager gossips formed up around him, ready to share their personal anecdotes. They seemed unconcerned with whether or not he'd

invited any given one of them to share.

Apparently, Erich was always good with his hands, and had made a whole set of ehrengarde pieces and donated them to the communal meeting room. Not only that, he had also crafted a statuette of the Harvest Goddess to be gifted to the church. Then there was the time when he had taken on dozens of foes during one of the Watch's training sessions, his cool expression never wavering. He was a caring lad, remembered fondly by his peers and juniors alike. And so on did the stories go.

This onslaught of detail had come upon him because the people of Konigstuhl *knew* that he wanted something extra for future performances. One of the kids even presented a rather well-crafted toy that Erich had made during his return when he was fifteen.

"Unka's awesome! He made this staff which, look, glows when you wave it!"

"He made me a sword too! It goes *vwoom* when you swing it!"

"Yeah, but look at my spear! It sticks to your back like this!"

"My turn, my turn! Look at my bow! You can shoot arrows like *pew, pew, pew*, but it doesn't hurt at all!"

This is exactly what I wanted, the poet said inwardly, giving a beaming smile.

Some people didn't like to hear about the hero's daily life because it got in the way of the action, but it was a necessary element to flesh out the character. Heroes were beings that the masses looked up to, but it was important to sometimes show their human side. It didn't just create a connection between the audience and the hero; it drew them into the world of the song.

If people shared their favorable impressions of a beloved hero, then he could elevate the song to an indispensable classic.

It was true that sometimes you hit upon some...less favorable elements when researching a living hero, but cherry-picking the best bits was part of a poet's job. Fortunately for him, Erich was beloved even outside of his family, with the worst stories amounting to "He sometimes says pretentious stuff without a shred of self-awareness." It made him an easy "character" to work with.

The poet couldn't help his laughter as the details poured in without him even asking anymore. He even began to think that it would be a waste to use these tales to simply pad out his performances. No, with this much intimate reportage, he could probably create a tale or two of his own! He could write one about Erich's childhood with a pastoral accompaniment—a sweet romance about his irreplaceable partner, Margit the Silent. That would be sure to capture the hearts of a female crowd.

The possibilities were many—from the story where he had shown his prowess with the sword and disarmed several opponents without even grazing them, to the tale where he had competed on equal footing in games of fox and geese against a natural-born huntress, to the famous incident where he saved his beloved sister.

"He fought them all off on his own?"

"You bet he did! He took down dozens of them one by one."

"Dear, stop that! Your brother didn't take down *that* many."

Apparently when Goldilocks Erich was only twelve, he went out alone and fought off a group of bandits before they could kidnap his sister. The poet had reasoned that this story seemed a little bit exaggerated and nodded as the wife of the man the poet assumed was Erich's older brother cut him off.

His master had also shared another kernel of wisdom: only believe eighty percent of what you hear from a hero's family.

"They only captured about ten men," she went on. "That means he must have taken down fewer than that. Right, Mister Lambert?"

"I think it was only five, actually. To be honest, I was surprised that he managed not to accidentally kill any at his age. He'd nailed one of them in the shoulder with a dagger; an inch off and he would've been a goner."

And yet, here was a trusty-looking fellow with a warrior's trim, happily corroborating the most outlandish parts! No matter how much of a backbone Erich had grown from attending spartan training sessions with the Watch, it was objectively absurd for a *twelve-year-old* to defeat even five bandits.

"We sent a report to the magistrate. The documents should be around

somewhere.”

“Oh yeah, we *did* get a receipt for that, didn’t we?” Erich’s brother said. “I remember that noble lady paid us in advance. Generous of her. Now what was her name again?”

“Hmm, Agnes? Angelika? Something like that.”

“Wasn’t it an Imperial name? It seemed kind of Orison-y.”

“No, no, no,” the wife said. “If it was an Orisons name it would be longer and more graceful. It was just an old-fashioned name.”

The poet wasn’t keen on prying into that side of the affair. Everyone had a story about some performer who’d lost their head for inadvertently smearing one aristocrat or another. As such, most poets with any sense wouldn’t even *allude* to any particular noble folk. Ambiguity just spread the risk around. The sagas were so vague and spotty about who was in charge when less because of the ravages of time and the limits of mortal memory, and more because songs whose singers risk losing a few fingers in the singing tend not to stay in circulation long.

And so, the poet internally decided that his ending would be “And a noble who could use magic cleaned everything up. The end.”

“He had loads of stories when he was an apprentice too.”

“Yeah, unka wrote about alfar! He said whenever wintertime comes around, we should hold a, um...a serviss for one of them!”

This story about how he became an apprentice for a magus to save his changeling sister—something no one had written poems about—was a good way to change the subject. The poet idly listened to the children’s stories—told with gestures and lots of excited sound effects—as he interviewed Erich’s family for more details.

“Ahh, yeah. The alfar story happened not long after, when he was still twelve. He said he failed to save an alf,” his brother said. “The ink on the letter was all smudged with tears.”

“Thinking back on it now,” his father added, “I think he wanted to process

what happened by putting it into words."

Before he felt any sympathy, the poet felt a spark of joy that he would be able to *really* flesh out Erich's character. He sighed at himself inwardly and reflected that this was why people looked down on his trade as a cruel and low one.

The fact of the matter remained that a compassionate and loving hero was beloved in all Ages. Alongside romances where a hero finds love with an incomparable beauty or one of their adventuring partners, the story of one man plucking up his courage and rising from a nobody into a hero never failed to rouse up the audience.

Feeling that this would definitely come in handy, he gleaned all he could from the family in their excitement. Despite his occupation as an adventurer, Goldilocks Erich was apparently a ready writer with skillful penmanship, and had sent letters of all kinds back home over the years. Unsurprisingly, they didn't show the poet the actual letters. He wrote at length about things that brought him joy, and although the poet got a lot of little anecdotes that would sit well in a more encyclopedic work on the man, they would be difficult to employ into a drama in verse.

This would be where his mettle was truly tested. The poet decided that he would try his luck with boarding another traveling caravan later down the line and stay in Konigstuhl canton for a little while to pad out his cash cow.

If he didn't get more tales to pen into a song of his own, then his beloved lute would make decidedly unmusical sounds of despair. To add to it, his fingers were in no state to help his current caravan's upcoming business. His bed and board had been paid for in chores and odd tasks, so his time and money would be better spent staying here and doing research.

However, there was something that stuck in his mind.

Goldilocks Erich was a hero who swung his sword atop a steed. The poet knew little of the way of the sword, but Erich had the head of the Watch's own awestruck seal of approval—it must have been the real deal. This man spoke of Erich as if he were his own son; he plainly couldn't put the boy's talent into coherent sentences.

That was all fine and good, but what didn't make sense was just how much

Erich's nephew complimented his uncle's magical skills.

There were many adventurers in this world with the gift for magic, but the poet could not recall any scenes in the stories he'd heard of Goldilocks Erich where he'd put it to use. It didn't make sense for someone with such an incredible asset *not* to leverage it against a foe worth a small fortune if returned alive. If the poet were in Erich's shoes, he would never have been able to keep his sorcerous skill under his hat. He would have gone into that battle with every measure he had and stolen the spotlight.

After all, even in the Age of Gods, it was rare to find someone blessed in the ways of both sword and sorcery. One of the most famous cases was the wandering Sir Carsten, who had been raised from mere mortal stock by a miracle later in life, imbuing him with superhuman strength.

The world had no shortage of oddities, though. The poet dimly recalled a rumor he'd heard—it was hardly his field, so he'd never bothered to really probe into it—that certain legendary ehrengarde players would, in challenging certain opponents, declare that they would simply never move one of their key pieces and *still* claim a victory. Yet the field of battle was no idle board game. Short of truly *unhinged* stakes, such pastimes would never claim a life. So who would dare do such a thing in a real fray?

"Unka's magic was so cool! He had this pipe, yeah, and made a ship out of the smoke that was like *whoosh*!"

"Ooh, yeah, I saw him do magic too! It was snowing and he was like, 'Take this blizzard attack!' and sent snow flying everywhere!"

If Goldilocks Erich did, as it seemed, do such a thing in real life, then he was a veritable madman.

From the excited way these children were talking, it seemed like his magic wasn't just a parlor trick—he was the real deal. The poet had seen smoke rings before, but never something so complicated as a smoke ship.

If that wasn't enough, his neighbors explained how Erich had fixed their roofs or created a magical source of light in their homes to help with housework. This was no mere dabbler or hedge mage's work.

The poet was intrigued, but was uncertain whether he should share this side of Goldilocks. It would paint a beautiful image to have this young man with flowing golden hair swinging his sword and unleashing mighty spells, but he couldn't rid himself of the question of why he had chosen *not* to do so in his duel with Baltlinden.

It was true that songs about adventurers walked the line between fact and fiction, but they could never stray too far from the truth. If he worked the magic angle into this particular tale, people would start to question his sources.

Despite these concerns, the poet could not resist probing deeper.

"Hold on a sec! It's unfair for you to just be listening! Don't you have any other tales?"

"Oh yeah! You've been around with the caravan—you must've heard some rumors about him!"

"If you don't got any, then sing us another song! Your fingers look pretty beat up, but you can do it acapella, right?"

The poet had wanted to probe the crowd further as they grew yet more sloshed, but their request had floored him. It would not be understating it that the song he'd performed today was the only story he knew of Erich of Konigstuhl. He was at a loss for words and in deep trouble.

Someone called out that if he didn't have any more songs, then he could perform something on the spot with the information he'd been penning down. The poet prayed to the God of Music once more.

As he rifled through his notepad and kneaded the various stories in his head, he found himself thinking he was still too slow, too rigid, to really be worthy of his own aspirations yet. The poet had never before performed something impromptu.

He was sure that if the subject were here, he would proclaim that he didn't recognize this version of him in the song, as all the anecdotes were bungled together, but the poet pushed those thoughts to the side as he prepared to sing once more, his throat feeling mysteriously quenched once again.

[Tips] When poets add their own flair to a song, the performance can start to take on different forms from region to region.

Early Spring of the Sixteenth Year

The PCs' Base of Activities

In fantasy systems, it can be inconvenient for PCs to constantly be moving around from place to place, so many players eventually settle into some kind of central stomping ground. It's always amusing to watch the PCs scramble to react as the GM unveils to the players that something unsavory is brewing "close to home." Of course, some PCs, especially those with less sociable backstories or more mercenary settings, may choose to pack their bags and move somewhere more favorable. It is a test of the GM's mettle to see how they can tie down such rootless adventurers.

As I wrapped up my letter with its usual formal farewell, something struck me—the letters of famous people in the past had a way of ending up on display for all to read.

The Trialist Empire of Rhine had a higher urban population than its neighboring states, and maybe because of this, it had a high literacy rate. Even well-off farming households—ones like mine, which were a smidgen above the average—often sent relatives mail with seasonal greetings and the like. Because of this, it was possible to say that acumen with the written word was part of our national character.

Of course, this trait extended to the noble class too. Public letters were treated with much care, their senders making sure to affix beautiful wax seals imprinted with their family crest. However, recipients often were so taken by the presentation and aesthetics of the penmanship inside that they often broke from common courtesy and kept the letters for preservation's sake—to the sender's chagrin, were they ever to find out.

As the years passed by, letters sent between nobles ended up kept for safekeeping at the Imperial Archives, the Imperial Library, and the College stacks. Whereas most common folk used cheap paper, nobles used high-quality

stuff that could weather the passage of time.

I had vague memories of letters in my old world from the Meiji Restoration or the Heian period retranslated into modern Japanese. One example was the letters from Date Masamune. He scribbled his letters without much care for beauty and would end them with a postscript that said “Burn after reading”—an ironic message that people centuries later could still read. I supposed it was the price one always paid for fame.

At any rate, as I finished up my own letter, I looked at some of the blank space at the bottom and thought, *Maybe I should include my own “please burn after reading” postscript. It’s a bit late coming, considering how many letters I’ve sent.*

“Hmm, nah. I’m probably overthinking it.”

I smiled to myself, cleaned the ink off the nib of my quill, and folded the letter.

This was a personal letter, not some public announcement, and I wasn’t famous or anything. I was just your run-of-the-mill adventurer. My rank was rising at a respectable enough rate, yes, but it wasn’t as if I was worthy of having my letter kept for posterity.

I still felt a pang of sympathy for those whose inner thoughts were put on display. A long love letter the Emperor of Creation had sent from the battlefield to his wife now hung framed in the Imperial palace. To add insult to injury, the courier had been captured, and the letter had never reached its intended recipient. The letter was discovered centuries after the Emperor’s passing. No one even thought about getting rid of it—rather they were overjoyed that the person in question wasn’t there to veto the suggestion to preserve it.

If it were me? I would probably turn into a wraith so I could set it ablaze in person.

“Now then, to the matter at hand.”

I finished the letter off with a simple glue seal and snapped my fingers. It was time to bring out some of my fanciest paper and wax, exclusively for noble recipients, from my magic box. I kept it fully stocked at all times; one never

knew when the situation might demand a smart-looking letter to someone with pull. It was far too nice to be used for my family. To be honest, this paper had only ever seen one recipient.

It was finally time to make a request of my former employer.

“Why is it that when a deadline’s close, it’s always easier to do anything but what you actually need to?”

It had been a little while since we had returned from the ichor maze of the cursed cedar, and the delicate spring weather had finally reached Marsheim. I imagined that the farmers were bustling about, prepping the fields and dealing with their livestock by now. My own family were no exception, no doubt.

“Ugh, how do I even start this? I can’t just write my usual seasonal greeting and cap it off with ‘PS, I was summoned by the Association manager,’ can I?”

Our party—although Siegfried still fiercely denied that that was what we were—had emerged from that allergenic hell with enough scabs to put all visits to the baths on hold a while longer. Rest and healing, however, would have to wait a while for me. Marsheim, ever a harsh mistress, welcomed me home with a new crisis.

It’s not that we’d bungled something at some critical juncture during the long haul of our quest. We had followed up afterward with the villagers—no deadly pollen rain had descended upon the canton. The worst they’d had to say was that a few bored farmers occupied themselves with idle bets on whether we’d been eaten by wolves or woken a bear early.

The problem at hand was the summons that I had received from the Association manager after handing in a report announcing our safe return. It was a formal message that requested my personal presence. It wasn’t a little “Hey, I need to see you!” called out from across the room—no, she went to all the effort to send it in a letter. If that wasn’t enough to tell me it was heavy business, it bore her own personal seal and was stamped in such a way that I knew she had her own copy just in case.

This most serious of serious letters was the sort of thing that the government would keep for fifty years just as insurance—it was a cursed thing oozing menace. I wasn’t sure what the standard for official letters from the

Adventurer's Association was, but the grandiose nature of the envelope told me that it was *not* an invitation to a tea party.

If it had been a meeting telling me that they were going to help line up a few good gigs for their rising star, or if it had been advice for reaching the next rank, then I was certain it would have come from the lovely ladies at reception.

In all honesty, the whole thing *stunk*—and no mere eggy whiff that you could pinch your nose and ignore, but a rippling, roiling, nearly living funk that crept up your airways and made its home there: the kind of stink I'd happily light a stick of thermite to clear, given the chance.

Any joy at making it home mostly intact had slipped my mind in an instant, but when I considered just how fishy the original request for this mission had been, the hints had been there all along.

The people of Zeufar hadn't been in all that much trouble. To top it off, the local lords whom the margrave was, to put it lightly, not getting on with were at the heart of the matter. I had totally forgotten that my conduct once I got back to town could screw me just as badly as any misstep in the heat of battle.

I mean, come on, it was two whole months ago! We'd fought for our lives through a brutal gauntlet while the year came and went. I couldn't be blamed for forgetting one or two things.

I had won the little bet I'd made with Siegfried and got the whole gang to go to Marsheim's second-best bathhouse; afterward we had some amazing food and drink. We'd *earned* it, for all the hell we'd been through. We'd cleared a long-haul megadungeon in a single foray, knocking out more encounters than I could rightly tally up. It'd be weirder for someone to actually remember the original hook that had gotten them involved to begin with!

Come after me if you want, but consider for a moment a familiar hypothetical: New Year's has come and gone, and you've been grinding through a mountain of work the whole time. In the middle of it all, you were sent some super important task, but it's not due until May—is that *really* going to be the first thing on your mind once you're out from under your backlog? Do you honestly believe you're even going to remember that it's there until suddenly the deadline's breathing down your neck? If you're the kind of superbeing that

genuinely functions like that, go ahead and cast the first stone.

We always said that the adventure only ends once you get home, but in this case I had an even rougher time of it *after* I was safe in my bed.

Hold on... No, sometimes unpacking your bags, washing your dirty laundry, and handing out souvenirs could prove more tiring than the trip itself. Maybe this was a kind of offshoot of that.

The terrible nature of the situation had sent me doom spiraling, but I found my hand writing out beautiful letters upon the page. My years spent in indenture had left me with something worth crowing about, evidently. Then again, this paper cost as much as a year's earnings from housebound jobs back home. I literally couldn't afford to screw up.

After wringing my brain and wrangling with my thoughts, the final result I had hit upon was an embarrassing cry for help.

I didn't have the bandwidth for this right now. If I had a better information network in Marsheim, or if I could pull in a favor from some *other* major player, then that would have been best, but I had no other options.

I mean, more than half of my connections column in Marsheim was made up of people I'd beaten up or threatened to achieve my current stability.

There was Clan Laurentius, but half had muscles for brains and the other half were her ardent followers. Mister Fidelio was the most reliable, but he had distanced himself from matters of politics or governance; even if I only went to him for pointers, I doubted it would lead to an ideal fix. There was one woman in town in particular who probably had some pretty choice dirt for me, but I *really* didn't want to get involved with her business any more than necessary. It didn't matter how profitable her operation was—you couldn't trust anyone who didn't abide by a commandment as straightforward as "never get high on your own supply." I was best off letting her nonsense come to my doorstep, as it had a way of doing regardless.

All I wanted was to live a normal adventuring life! I didn't want all this cloak-and-dagger Great Game business that didn't even leave you enough energy to chat about it with your friends in the café afterward—I wanted a heroic tale where the unforgivable villain gets put to trial for his wicked misdeeds in the

end!

The Baldur Clan's affairs were an object lesson in the adage "the dose makes the poison." Their involvement was like aconite—the slightest bit too much, and it turned from cure to killer.

I had the extreme fortune of being reborn into a fantasy world—ignoring the worldly difficulties and simple economic upkeep of this new world that made me want to cry—and for my purposes, I wanted to preserve whatever joy and whimsy of living here I had left. I'd never be happy winning my fame as an assassin or a two-bit gangster.

That wasn't to say that I had hated playing these roles back at the table. But that wasn't what I wanted from this life. Our party was a little bit unbalanced, but here we were—a team of fledgling adventurers, back from a successful campaign. I was absolutely against any misstep that would lead me into the pit of darkness or trapped in the world of upper-crust society.

That meant I needed to use any measure at my disposal. The most ideal means of escaping an unideal situation hinged on a clear view of the situation. If I could do that, then I could then choose whether to put up a fight or distance myself from the matter at hand.

Sure, it meant I might have to cope with a vicious verbal drubbing from my old employer, but a bitter medicine is easier to take when you know the side effects beforehand.

I wrote the letter while my Independent Processing made sure there were no spelling errors or phrases that were unacceptable for a noble's eyes. I wanted to give myself a pat on the back for choosing to divide up my processing capabilities instead of merely speeding them up. Independent Processing wasn't simple multitasking—I had many thoughts running simultaneously, which could stop me before I made even the tiniest of mistakes.

You needed a high base mental capacity in order to start getting traits that poked around in philosophically troubling territory. The particular talent tree I'd chosen had ended up benefiting me beyond what I could have foreseen.

Right, this looks good. My penmanship hadn't gotten rusty since the end of my term of service. I lifted up the letter and began to weave a formula to

magically seal it.

This was no fancy postage stamp. The paper I had used was specially crafted so that I could use a spell to compress two pages into one, which meant even a magical layman such as myself could easily transfigure it into a paper canary.

All that was left to do was open a little portal with space-time magic and send it off to Lady Agrippina. Naturally I hadn't received privileges to open a portal right into her workshop, but I was permitted my own personal box—more than enough for the occasional letter. It only took a moment for the letter to arrive.

The problem was whether the esteemed and extremely busy count thaumapalatine would be in her workshop or not.

This issue really hinged on luck. Her occasional letters to me laid bare, in unflinching detail, the unbearable weight of peerless beauty, talent, and skill. She was, at any given moment, run ragged with all manner of demands on her time and attention. Her role included upkeep of Ubiorum county, her public duties in the College, and the work that came with being a professor—namely aeroship development. No matter how talented she was, her workload was more than reason enough to cry uncle, not least because if she worked herself to death, odds were good that her contributions would be considered so vital that the Empire would commit copious resources toward dragging her back from the grave just to pick up where she left off.

There were many tasks that she had to complete in person, and so even if she had returned home just at this moment, it would be luck that decided when my reply would arrive.

Elisa wasn't allowed to open my personal mailbox either, so all I could do was pray for a swift reply.

As I inwardly begged, *Come on, don't give me a dud roll,* Lady Agrippina's reply came with astounding speed.

As my former employer's beloved butterfly-shaped paper came fluttering out of the crack in the fabric of space, I could almost hear the GM announce, "If you don't follow this, then the story's not gonna progress" as they kindly brought some of the PCs back together again.

As my fingers touched the butterfly, it elegantly folded out into a single piece of paper. The letter was only one word long: “Come.” Below was a written formula that would allow me to warp to her workshop by simply passing my own magic through it.

Typical... After I spent all that time composing my letter in palatial style...

I held the churn of my mixed feelings steady and let out a deep sigh as I fixed up my appearance, then headed over.

[Tips] People are forgetful creatures, no matter how much they try to combat their nature with memos and notes. It isn’t rare for a player to completely forget about a previous story thread if a campaign has grown overly complex.

Lady Agrippina’s various titles had multiplied in the time that I had been gone—Count Ubiorum, professor in the School of Daybreak’s Leizniz cadre, chief of various research programs—but the atmosphere in her peaceful, greenhouse-like workshop was the same as ever. As was the way that my former employer splayed out upon her beloved couch.

Her easy demeanor despite the slew of unimaginably brutal tasks pushed past merely “awe-inspiring” to legitimately terror-inducing. She should at least have had some trace of dark circles under her eyes. It might have been endearing if some outward trace of exhaustion showed through a little hastily applied makeup. Her perfection freaked me out.

“Apologies for the intrusion. Erich of Konigstuhl humbly announces his presence before you.”

“Welcome, retainer of mine.”

I dropped to my knee with more delicacy and precision than I had before.

“Ah, of course. You’re an adventurer now.”

Unlike before, I wasn’t standing here as her servant. I was no longer of a station that permitted easy communication; I needed to behave properly before a noble of the Empire.

“How has the past year been?”

“Much has come and gone that I did not expect. However, if I may deign to say so, the past days have proved pleasant enough.”

My humble speech came out—I couldn’t rid myself of it, even when I was sure no one was watching. She had been strict in this regard—she wasn’t the sort of person who would allow their servant to light up their pipe in someone else’s office just because they could do it at their boss’s.

“You may be at ease.”

“By your honored permission.”

However, even if it was tiring, this whole formal song and dance was a necessary element in changing the atmosphere of the room.

Without all the decorum, if she let slip one of her usual wholly out-of-pocket manic insights, I doubt I could stop myself from voicing some of the thoughts *I* had kept a tight lock on around her in turn. Lady Agrippina was rather relaxed in her personal space, so I didn’t want to cause a scene by accidentally saying something snide. Embarrassing either of us could cost me my head, and that was a transformation I wasn’t ready for.

Now that I had received her permission, I sat down with some ease on the chair before her...and then realized something important.

This is her oblique way of asking me to make tea.

It didn't take a big leap of logic to assume that Lady Agrippina's idea of being "at ease" was for me to return to how our relationship was before I quit. To be honest, I much preferred interacting with her in that familiar way. I wasn't used to treading on eggshells around her.

I knew exactly what to do. I sent my Unseen Hands into the kitchen to begin preparing the tea, not bothering to get up. It seemed that everything was still in the same place as before, so I managed to get everything done without Farsight by simply adding on the capacity to sense what I was touching.

The loaded tea tray floated into the room—I knew internally that they were being carried, but it still looked kind of supernatural—and I took the cups with my flesh-and-blood hands, handing one to the lethargic madam still lazing upon the couch.

She took the piping cup of red tea and brought it to her lips with all the elegance in the world. I could sense mana roll off of her as she ran all sorts of tests to check the tea for mundane and magical hazards, all before it was even close enough for a sip. Regular poisons had no effect on her, but her temperament left her unable to let down her guard in front of anything or anyone. I thought I must be suffering from some kind of mental illness to find *relief* in seeing this side of her unchanged.

"Mm, not bad."

I inwardly breathed a sigh of relief. *Thank goodness, I haven't lost my ability to impress the madam—*ahem*, my former employer—anymore.*

During the final stretch of our stay in the ichor maze, our supplies of tea had run dry, and we'd been forced to improvise with what was available. On top of that, the Snoozing Kitten tended to hand out rather strong brews to travelers. I was a bit worried that my nose for the way she liked it had dulled under such external pressure.

"I'm rather relieved to see that you're as capable as ever, Erich."

“I suppose I can’t so easily forget the senses I developed under you. After all, your standards were rather high.”

“Indeed they are. Aren’t you happy you were in the employ of someone who could train you so well?”

My jab had been so easily rebuffed. It reaffirmed at that moment that I was no match for her.

It had been a year since we last met, and I realized what it meant to be unaging. If she had been a regular mensch, she would have been far more worn and ragged.

Hold on. Something was different—her smoking habits. She was famed as someone who enjoyed a smoke, so it made sense that she would be using one of the many pipes that she had been gifted since parting with her old one. The protective enchantment hadn’t been applied with as much care as the one that had been given to me, so there were some visible scratches and soot stains.

Most likely, she used one pipe at a few nighttime gatherings before throwing it out and moving on to the next. The pressures of her work hadn’t pushed her down to a level that concerned me, but the toll on her was visible now.

If a pipe wasn’t adjusted to deal with enchanted herbs, the effects of the magic would cause it to degrade far faster than usual. You needed to replace the wooden part of pipes used to smoke something made from nightshade—in other words, these pipes, too, were to be tossed after one use.

The pipe I had received from Lady Agrippina was made of ebony and designed with long-term use in mind. Fully metal pipes got too hot and were far too conductive; they weren’t ideal for times when you wanted a good, long smoke.

It was clear to me that she had imbued this pipe with a protective formula to prevent all damage. She’d meant to use it for a long time. It stood in stark contrast to these disposable things she was keeping in rotation now.

“You’re capable enough that I wouldn’t complain if you offered to return to my service, you know.”

“I’m...currently holed up in a comfy library, reading all the books I could desire. Would such a metaphor suffice, Count Ubiorum?”

“If so, then I won’t force your hand.”

My former employer tapped her pipe to empty its spent contents into an ashtray. It was quite the unusual sight—I supposed that she hadn’t magically enlarged the inside like she had with mine. Among the pipes she had received, none had taken her fancy as much.

I was rather surprised with the strength of the concoction she was currently smoking. Even from the scent of the secondhand smoke, I could tell that it had been intensively enriched with copious spellcraft. I was sure that Lady Agrippina would be fine, considering it was her own concoction, but if she let me have a puff, I was sure the noxious fumes would knock me out then and there.

“I would like to present to you a small souvenir—some small proof that adventuring is no laughing matter.”

I presented my souvenir, something to appease her before we got onto the real matter.

We had split the spoils from the ichor maze. This was the piece that I had gotten permission to take—the research diary of the herbalist who had tried to revive the sacred cedar.

Lady Agrippina’s love for books went beyond any mere bibliophile’s. It didn’t matter the genre or content, whether it was entertainment, an old diary, or even someone’s thesis—she would read them all with gusto.

Unfortunately, this diary-cum-research log was a bit too meandering to be published as a paper—it made sense, considering they were her own personal notes—but I thought she would enjoy it as a simple read. It ended with the herbalist’s own gruesome death, so it could be read as a horror story written in an intimate style. Those sentences, only growing more troubled as the impending deadline set by the cruel villain drew ever closer, bore an aura horrible enough to cause Kaya’s face to lose all color when I asked if she wanted to use it for her own research.

“An old diary, I see. Whose is it?”

“An herbalist whose end was cruel and bitter enough to form an ichor maze. It was written back when the local lords of Marsheim were vying for hegemony,

before they started calling the old city Altheim."

"I see."

She flicked through its pages and, seemingly happy with it, drew out a slip that could be exchanged for payment.

"*Cedrus sancta*, indeed. Quite interesting. How's two hundred?"

It was a souvenir, but I hadn't specified if it was a *free* gift or not, so Lady Agrippina quickly told me how much she was willing to part with for it. She wasn't stingy with money, so I was always happy to do business with her in the long run.

It would make for fifty drachmae per head. I was sure that Siegfried, who had almost been burned to a crisp to save his partner, would be overjoyed. We'd walked away with a hefty pile of loot, but unfortunately it was all items that would either be difficult to convert into cash or that the party wanted to use for their own sake. It was nice to get a little hard cash out of it.

"More than enough. I am sure my fellows will be happy to receive it."

"You're sharing? A generous one, you are."

"An adventurer's party gets stronger with equal growth. It is a unit that functions as a greater whole."

"My, you are having fun."

Hell yeah I am. It was true that I was slagging off the crooked DM all throughout our trip in the ichor maze, but time heals all wounds, as they say—it's become a fond memory now.

Well, if someone asked me if I'd do it all again I'd have to give it a hard pass. For an Imperial citizen, losing out on your baths and tea is worse than having needles stuck under your nails.

"And now you've come crying to me in my inbox now because some dark shadow looms over your jolly adventuring life?"

"It is exactly as you say."

Lady Agrippina nodded at me, bidding me to wait a moment and let out a

plume of smoke as she stared up into the middle distance. It was an act common to methuselah; while not forgetful, they sometimes needed more time than most to sort through their memories for anything precise. Maybe it was the uncanny nature of this act that made regular mortals keep them at arm's length—even though they took a while to get there, they were able to recall things that a regular person would have long since forgotten. I doubted anyone liked being at such a disadvantage.

"There we go, I've remembered. After you said you were bound for Marsheim, I allowed myself a little peek into Maxine Mia Rehmann's affairs. She is the illegitimate child of the former margrave, Otto Liudolf Liutgard von Mars-Baden. Apparently she's quite the formidable one. Her reputation holds up. She's done well keeping her little fiefdom civil and orderly."

Gods above, this woman scares me. She did all this digging just because her former servant was moving in? She'd gone *awfully* deep.

"She is the current Margrave Marsheim's older sister's child. The former margrave was deeply in love with her mother—though you ought to note that this is not public knowledge."

"Your research skills are incredible."

The information networks of nobles terrified me. From the outside, it looked like Lady Agrippina was just chilling out on the sofa having a smoke, but she was drawing information from her brain that had come from somewhere that would take a whole season to ride to.

More importantly, my theory about the Association manager was right. I felt even less compelled to get entangled in her business now.

"In all honesty, I have not done anything so untoward to warrant being called in, so I am rather concerned about her desire to meet with me face-to-face. I believe that my rising to amber-orange was quite unusual."

"And as you stated, you are concerned that you may be forced into shady work dealing with local lords who are kicking each other's shins under the table."

"Fortunately there is time before the summons, but I can't sit still with the

concern.”

I would have preferred if I was being called in for a telling off. That way I could mentally prepare for what I knew was coming and even think about how to appease her. What I feared the most was an appointment with the higher-ups about something I couldn’t even begin to fathom with time to worry in between. It was kind of like having your work day interrupted by the manager and having more work put on your desk without even a word of warning. At any rate, the unknowns made it all the more troubling.

I wouldn’t have minded if this had been a regular, seasonal check-in with her, but it could be anything from a little bonus for my good work or a punishment dressed up as a promotion, where I would be posted at a new branch in a country miles away that I’d never heard of. The more I started to worry, the more horrible outcomes started to form in my mind.

“This is a common tactic among people like her. One misstep and you’ll end up as the margrave’s dog.”

“You...think so?”

“You’re a valuable asset. Even I would prefer it if you worked for me. Of course they want you. Their financial situation at present is frankly not great.”

“Really?”

I couldn’t help but express my surprise. Marsheim and the surrounding region were the front lines against our neighbors, so the Empire took their needs seriously. It didn’t make sense to me for them to be suffering financially. Marsheim was fed by import taxes from the Mauser River and various trade routes that passed through—I would have thought that the margrave’s coffers were quite well stocked. No matter how greedy his subordinates might be for pensions, no matter how much costs went aside to military measures to maintain the peace, financial instability didn’t seem likely in my eyes.

“They don’t have enough people, higher-ranking folk in particular—the sorts who could act as officers on the front line. They can just about make do in times of peace, but there are many who are only outwardly subservient to the margrave. These possible turncoats are making it hard to run things.”

Lady Agrippina explained that this was merely a working theory extrapolated from the available information, but it seemed like the appeasement policy against the bigwigs and other powerful local lords had failed. Their reasoning came from emotion, not logic, and they continued to sneer at the Empire as they refused to comply.

The situation was plain as day—social order in Marsheim was barely holding on. It hadn't yet reached a point of no return—nobody was going to cut off their neighbor's hand for a shot at their wristwatch just yet—but it would be an understatement to say that crooks like Jonas Baltlinden brazenly assaulting carriages loaded with land tax was the sort of thing that flew *far* below the Empire's standards.

Marsheim wasn't united, and the situation was only growing worse for lack of a coordinated effort to build control. If lower-class nobles like knights and barons had done their job of keeping the peace, then things wouldn't have gotten this bad. I suspected that the government had been willing to take the hit to their purses if it meant that they could put off resolving its own internal issues. Nobody wanted to be the one to kick off a civil war, regardless of how desperately the local power structure needed pruning.

"If you ask me, the previous Margrave Marsheim should have brought a swift and permanent end to their problem. This all happened because these local heavyweights—this lot who used to have control—have deepened their roots through strategic marriages."

"You're saying he was soft?"

"As a fluffy bunny. Even if he had asked to increase his personnel by five times the number he had, in a demotion-led reshuffle, that wouldn't even amount to half as soft."

Oof, now that's soft. And I like *soft things, usually.*

"If it were me, I would dispose of everyone within five generations—basically their great-great-grandparents and everyone descended therefrom. That or I would instill in their education system an affinity for the Empire—no matter how distantly they may be related to the ones who had caused the trouble."

"You're saying if they're educated, they won't forget the history?"

“Yes. Ridiculous, isn’t it? Five hundred years on from its founding, in the heart of the continent where the first few squabbling veterans thought to cooperate, the Empire still welcomes new blood, and the bonds of the nation hold fast. So why does this handful of fools in the farthest reaches think they can spend their days moaning about independence?”

“I don’t think tribalist attitudes can be explained away with logic. I suppose it’s partly the Empire’s fault for not educating them that they *are* part of the Empire.”

The pages of history are lined with countless countries who let tens of thousands of their people die for the sake of a few months or years of prolonged independence. Just as the former Yugoslavia didn’t last long, a nation-state was sure to fall apart if the people in it couldn’t at least pretend to have *some* kind of shared identity.

Even in Japan, a small island nation whose people were overwhelmingly from one place, people liked to purport the differences inherent in their prefecture. I doubted that forcing a homogenized, unitary ideology on a landlocked nation was an easy task.

In that sense, I couldn’t help but quake in awe at the might of the Emperor of Creation and the three Imperial generations that followed. It must have been a mighty feat to bring such a multiracial and multiethnic group together, instill within them the identity of the model Imperial subject, and ensure that the nation didn’t fall to pieces after all this time.

“Indeed. Financially speaking, they’re scraping in the dirt at the bottom of the ladder. The moment they started scrabbling to acquire useful pieces like yourself to array against each other, they laid the groundwork for their collapse. If you wish to simply enjoy your adventures, I would suggest moving to the north, or perhaps the east.”

“Apologies, but I’ve developed quite the fondness for the place.”

“You don’t wish to move. I see. Then you’d best be prepared to pay what you’re worth in recompense to those who’d own you.”

“I do not wish to borrow your might. I merely hoped I could receive some advice.”

Lady Agrippina let out a groan before tapping her pipe once more on the ashtray. *Was she always so uncouth when smoking? I remember her being a bit more refined.*

“Here. Take this.”

After some thought, Lady Agrippina snapped her fingers and revealed a single piece of paper. It was a little dirty, made of a rough material with the expectation it would be thrown away, and upon it was a job request for an adventurer issued by the Department of Lost Writing Retrieval.

In the good name of all the gods above! She actually did it! She didn’t use her position as Count Ubiorum to pull together a little task force—no, she wrangled the creation of an *official governmental department*, all to keep her to-read pile stocked!

“W-Wow, you’ve gone to some impressive lengths to keep your appetite sated—and in the Emperor’s name, no less.”

“I suppose I did. I convinced them with the help of the College’s librarians. I got the Imperial Library involved to make it all the more convincing, and now we have a pleasant little budget all to ourselves. A little reward for all the backbreaking work I’ve been doing is in order, no?”

How am I meant to respond to someone who creates a government-approved *department with all the nonchalance of a tired-out businesswoman buying herself a new piece of jewelry?!* I was sure that the department would be pretty aboveboard and only do what they were made for, but I would put a bet on future generations assuming that the Department of Lost Writing Retrieval was a secret intelligence agency.

“We’re giving it a trial run in Berylin for now, but I’ll make sure you get approval out in Marsheim.”

“I’m glad to hear it’s going so well...”

“Now then, wait just a second.”

Lady Agrippina completely ignored my dumbfounded expression and scribbled out a few pages with some official requests. Each of them bore the Department of Lost Writing Retrieval’s stamp and explicitly requested that I

search for a number of legendary tomes that were said to lay in the west.

"*The Pseudepigrapha of Exilia*, *Apocryphal Rites of the Sun God*, *Psalms to Beckon the Apocalypse*... All of these are from the Age of Gods. Aren't some of these rumored to not even exist?"

Each of these were texts that existed only in urban legends.

The Pseudepigrapha of Exilia was a stone tablet inscribed with a divine message imparted long before the Age of Gods, claiming that mensch would one day reign supreme over all others. The *Apocryphal Rites of the Sun God* was a portion of Sun God scriptures which didn't exist in the main temple even as a copy of a copy of a copy. As its name suggested, it was of dubious authenticity. As for the *Psalms to Beckon the Apocalypse*, it was a copper scroll inscribed by a blind great magus which contained details, passed down by an outer god, which told of how to destroy the very world. It was said to be even more strange and mysterious than the *Compendium of Forgotten Divine Rites*.

She was asking me to search for these with all the seriousness in the world. If I could, I'd introduce her to the rowdy lot who chalked up all sorts of calamities to Nostradamus's predictions and spent all their days bemoaning the state of the world.

"But they are said to exist. If you find them, I would like you to bring them to me."

"I suppose I can understand why..."

I wasn't without my own collector's vices. If someone dug up a first-edition copy of a certain cosmic horror investigation TRPG, or the premier dungeon-crawling TRPG in its signature red box, then I couldn't rightly say no.

"If you show her this, then you can implicitly let her know that you're a little busy and someone else is currently using you right now. I think it's a little less aggressive than showing an Imperial ring."

"Thank you. I'll use it graciously."

"I won't lie and say that I'm not keen to get them. Each would fetch you five thousand drachmae, minimum. Search well."

I was truly thankful for the job, but I just didn't know how to respond to her easy disposition in posing such a bone-chilling request. It was important to remember that if *this* woman was asking me to fetch them, then that meant that she was certain, at least to a degree, that they did in fact exist. Why else would she suggest the reward price up front?

I thought that I should probably get started on the search now that she had got me involved in this wild book chase, but each and every one of them was looking to be a major pain in the backside...

"You were the one who chose the life of an adventurer, with all its freedoms and responsibilities. Don't forget you chose to turn down my request, so make sure to give me a good show. As your former boss, the least I can do is pay for your dance costume." She smiled and added, "Now then, there's nothing more pitiful to watch than a show where the actor's heart isn't in it."

She didn't even bother to hide that she derived some sort of deranged joy out of my discomfort, greedily devouring the sight of me squirming. Despite everything that had happened since I left, this utterly demonic side of her hadn't changed.

With the worry that I might have moved from the frying pan to the fire, I departed from my former employer and returned to Marsheim.

Now, I won't go into the details surrounding this, but I received quite the angry letter from Elisa, who was at a lecture at the time. She asked why I hadn't stayed just a little bit longer, and I was forced to reflect on the brotherly responsibilities I had accidentally managed to shirk...

[Tips] The Department of Lost Writing Retrieval is an official government body established under Count Agrippina von Ubiorum. It was founded with the aim of securing lost writings, rare tomes, and documents with anthropological value.

Due to the breadth of its remit, later generations would hold their own conspiracy theories that it was cover for the Empire's intelligence network.

Through her office window, the slender woman quietly clucked her tongue as

she watched an adventurer stroll past Adrian Imperial Plaza and out of sight.

Her name was Maxine Mia Rehmann. She was a beautiful woman who took care of her appearance, but most would see her frailty before her beauty. She was tall and incredibly gaunt, her wan cheeks holding a waxy pallor. Her slender, noble face was just as emaciated as her body, the heavy burden that she bore evident upon it. Despite being in the prime of her life, her black hair that reached the small of her back was already half filled with gray. The adventurers of sufficient rank to have much cause to speak of her at all called her the Lady of Ash or the Last Ember—testament to her endurance, yes, but one couldn't overlook the derogatory streak.

The fault could be found in her position as the manager of Marsheim's Adventurer's Association.

From the outside, the salary, privileges, and prestige made it seem like quite the esteemed position. However, to those in the know, it was the same as the Imperial government's Emperor's seat—nothing more than a dressed-up implement of torture. Maxine aired her complaints from the safety of the inside of her own head.

The Adventurer's Association had a long history that stretched back to the Age of Gods; it was rather unique in a cultural sense, in that its existence spanned borders. It had lost any sort of central seat of power when its original parent state fractured beyond recognition. Now the Associations across the land were only loosely connected, the real thing that bound them being the pact that adventurers would never take part in wars between nations.

It was a unique position to be in—the manager was highly respected, but they were not a government official. The Association resembled a monastery, yet it was not a temple. Above all it was an institution that kept the world's least employable afloat with cheap day labor and nominally legal thuggery. It wasn't a surprise that the higher-ups didn't view it all too favorably.

Furthermore, the laws of the Association dictated that within the bounds of the Empire, Association managers could not be of noble birth. Despite the fact that the only ones who would even be capable of passing judgment were the gods, the Empire dared not to do anything to upset Them, as the divine pact

was very much alive and well.

Maxine's personal herbalist had begged her to take it easier on the job. Begrudgingly, she still filled Maxine's prescriptions—pills and powders to settle the stomach and soothe the ulcer, salves for her mental fatigue—but nothing yet curbed her own inflamed thoughts.

"That foolish little brother of mine... He was too soft," she muttered, her distaste for Margrave Marsheim—and perhaps her contempt for the strictures of law and custom that forbid her from acknowledging their family ties in public.

What kind of monster had he tried to get her caught up with?

Marsheim's tensions were coming to a head, and with them, the margrave's desire for faithful pawns. He had a number of committed noble subordinates, but many who served him were opportunists—a number that needed constant surveillance, who would not hesitate to turn tail in an emergency.

There had always been scuffles with the local lords. However, as of yet there'd never been a true skirmish—categorized in Imperial records as battles involving five hundred or more combatants—which was the only reason things hadn't fallen into complete anarchy. It didn't help that the western territories had been unable to participate in the Eastern Conquest, due to physical distance and the Empire's preference to have a healthy reserve on standby. Hardly any of the battle-hardened soldiers that had survived their time out in the desert—blazing hot in the day, deathly cold in the night—were from the western periphery. With so few experienced in the art of war among the local cantons and mere weeks to mobilize a fighting force in the event of a real coup, the margrave had little hope of matching an opponent strength for strength. His trusted retainers or blood relatives were spread thin throughout the region, strategically placed to keep untrustworthy strongarms in check, and now it was starting to burn him.

His confidants had originally been stationed to watch over these local lords and act as intermediaries to smooth relations over. The strategy was that if they managed to solidify the outskirts of Marsheim, then the local lords would find it more difficult to connect with one another, and thus block them from seizing

majority rule. The local administration knew that this stratagem was crumbling before their eyes, and the cost of sustaining it any further was painfully clear.

Should the local lords' dissatisfaction explode into a revolt, just how many of their forces would be chipped away before they could even come together to fight as one?

A particular worry was that military families sympathetic to the Empire would be targeted first. Before an official declaration of war was announced, their manors would be surrounded, and the margrave's most-valued forces would be destroyed piece by piece. Even this would be enough to light the entirety of the western reaches ablaze.

It was too late for the margrave to hurriedly flee to another region—it would give away the administration's panic to anyone with two brain cells to rub together. His enemies would be left a huge window to stoke the flames of war while he was packing his things.

There was no doubt that if a revolt broke out now, the Empire would claim victory by the end. With enough time, the vassal states would come to their aid. If the Empire put their all behind the struggle, then these provincial fools could only yap like a puppy worrying at the heels of a wolf.

Yet at the end of the day this was merely domestic strife. There was no glory to be won, no new territory to claim—just a land laid barren by war and pointless loss of life. If the unruly local lords were wiped out, their territories would remain unstable, and odds were that it would create an influx of refugees and unlawful types as soon as the army pulled out.

The margrave's only option at this point was to headhunt. Unfortunately there was a limit to how many promotions he could give to the families that already populated his subordinates, and it would no doubt create a mountain of issues that would need to be dealt with once the revolts had settled down.

The plan was therefore to raise up some adventurers—disposable but useful playing pieces.

Recruiting big-time adventurers with their own large-scale clans would be a risky move, as they already had sway within Marsheim, but taking on a rookie adventurer was a different story. Training them up and instilling in them a fealty

to the margrave with the eventual goal to create a loyal vassal seemed to be an efficient and less-costly strategy. Of course, it wouldn't do to have them working under the title of "adventurer," but surely the gods wouldn't complain if the adventurer quit the business and received a peerage of their own accord.

The first test subject had been Goldilocks Erich, and the result of their meeting had made Maxine want to throw a whole pitcher of wine over her half brother.

"To think that he would see through my words and turn down a personal recommendation from the margrave... Just how wide is his purview?"

Maxine hadn't liked making a snap judgment, but she had reasoned that Erich was not someone to be trifled with. He was smart enough to have a confident read on the political situation. Neither was he interested in quick profit or social fame.

Any normal adventurer would have easily been swayed by a rapid ascension to amber-orange and a personal request to aid the margrave. He had the gift of gab—able to convey his meaning without explicating it—and this only made him seem more disgusting in her eyes.

Maxine had spared no quarter in trying to convince him of the situation, but Erich hadn't blanched in the slightest. He'd made no mention of the suspicious nature of his most recent job, nor the influence of the local lords in it; he'd simply feigned ignorance and said it was quite the thrilling adventure. There was no way they could control someone like that.

Not only that—the fact that he'd kept his cool in the face of the person who had been pulling the strings under the surface, still fully aware of the situation, was terrifying in its own regard.

Maxine's position meant she knew all too well the idiosyncrasies of the adventuring class—she had to herd them about, after all. No one else was more qualified to make the call. An adventurer guided by their own singular yet consistent logic would never be swayed by an appeal to the customary axioms of wealth and power.

Marsheim had its fair share of such textbook cases. They lived without inhibition. Saint Fidelio and his merry gang served only their own ideals, never

balking at the prospect of enacting punishment where they felt it was earned. Laurentius the Free and her gaggle of admirers used their singular strength to smash through any political subterfuge. And of course, there was Smokestack Nanna and her insipid chemical cultists, whose methods Maxine had no option but to overlook as they grew and spread the infernal fruits of her dope-sick mind.

Maxine had sensed the same stench from Erich as she did from them.

All of them were monsters, utterly inflexible in their convictions and swift to take up arms against the slightest obstruction of their ends. Even if Maxine had been able to integrate them into the margrave's machinations by kindness, favors, or obligation, they would never forget the slight that had been done against them. They would use any means at their disposal to ensure the master's hand would not come away clean or intact, once the leash was taken up.

Maxine's people had probed into Erich's relationship with Count Ubiorum. She had been told that their connection had waned in recent days. Plainly, this was false. Why else would he have received so many grave demands from that monster's Department of Lost Writing Retrieval?

He had laid his own defensive measures against the margrave's snares—measures too worldly for a man of noble birth to counter. In the meeting, Erich had simply announced that he wished to focus on this governmental task, and that he would only take on tasks that he'd chosen himself unless the matter was quite dire.

Maxine could only assume that Count Ubiorum had trained him from a young age to foster this obedience. The reins around his neck were merely so long that he had grown unable to see them—however, she was sure that he would still howl on command with one simple flick from his master.

It was clear from their meeting that as long as he was permitted a quiet life, Erich wouldn't do anything untoward. Maxine assumed that if he was left to his own devices he would continue to quash evildoers. After all, it was in an adventurer's nature to aspire to such heroic heights.

In this case, it would be far more expedient for Maxine to leave him be and to

continue to foster his goodwill toward Marsheim. Perhaps then, if some would-be separatist lord decided that now of all times was the right one for a fool's crusade, Erich would decide to leap to the region's defense on his own terms, driven by his private sense of justice.

Maxine had made a gamble, testing him as she had. She knew that when you reached into a snake's den, the odds were never zero that you might pull out a dragon. She was infuriated at herself for letting the meeting go so poorly. It would be an incalculable loss if she had stirred up ill feelings toward Marsheim and driven him to a new base of operations.

After all, Goldilocks Erich had already sent ripples through the relationship of a number of clans. It was true that he was only one person, but if he moved elsewhere out of a disgust with the prevailing political game, then the gap would be difficult to fill. He had proved a valuable deterrent. His absence would risk baiting in new and old evildoers alike.

Maxine's information network had caught something. The Exilrat, who had gone relatively quiet recently, had suddenly started to move upon someone else's domain.

More likely than not, a local lord was behind the matter. The settlements outside the city were a social grease trap for the dispossessed—those who had abandoned their countries, those whose countries had abandoned them, those who could no longer stay in their hometowns. Such folk had little cause to sympathize with the system as it stood. Any plan to sow unrest in the heart of the region would start there.

Personally, Maxine turned a blind eye toward small-scale villainy, viewing it as a necessary evil, but there came a point where the boot had to come down. She wore the boot; she made the call.

The decision to leave Goldilocks Erich as a wild card was a logistical call. It was evident that he had a fondness for the Empire. She wasn't sure where it came from, but she could safely wager that it would drive him to crush the very same enemies she'd considered pressuring him to, at less cost to her operation.

After all, he had already crossed blades with the Exilrat once. He would show even less hesitation the second time.

During their conversation, Maxine had sensed an unusually strong love for adventure. If it came between him and his thrill-seeking, he could be counted on to cut it down. Maxine had no intention of trying to force reins around adventurers that would never take to the plow in the first place. This was hardly the first time she'd found herself in a situation where the best approach was to let the other players do as they willed.

And in any case, she could hardly be made to clean up after Erich if he'd only *coincidentally* acted in her interests.

Maxine set to thinking of what to write in her report for that foolish brother of hers. She pondered what would really make the bastard *squirm*.

[Tips] The rules of an association created during the Age of Gods do not necessarily all fit into modern-day ideals. Personnel are chosen in the various nations across the land in order to stave off the wrath of the gods.

In the case of the Trialist Empire of Rhine, they dictate that a current noble —regardless of their birth and previous history—cannot be designated as manager.

A literally medieval-grade upbringing like mine tends to grind certain brutal gendered expectations into oneself. As much as I could tell where it all came from and resented the hell out of it, I still couldn't *stand* making other folks put up with the stuff that weighed on my mind. Academically speaking, I knew better, but down at gut level I hated the idea of coming off like a whiner.

That wasn't to say that I couldn't ask for *help*. I could never have survived this long without figuring out the trick of it. I had my own share of frustrations when we didn't discuss our next moves at the table and our support or tank ended up completely wasting their turn. That's why I had to plan out my next steps and—

Oh crap.

I felt a shiver run down my spine. Permanent Battlefield had put a quick stop to my idle thoughts of the past and Lightning Reflexes slowed my perception of time to a crawl.

I knew my defenses had been down, but I inwardly berated myself for allowing myself to slack off as soon as the door was shut behind me. I was as exposed as I would have been in the bath or under the covers. This was a locked, personal room at the Snoozing Kitten, but that was no excuse.

I felt a sharp killing urge from behind me and immediately released the energy from my legs, rolling forward to evade the blow before unleashing one of my own. I let my fey knife fly from my sleeve toward a shadow in the corner of my vision. The knife wasn't suited for throwing, but it was better than nothing. I landed on my shoulder and glanced to see if my attack had connected; in the next moment, my failure registered.

The blade had hit its mark, but my target had been a ragged cloak. The presence I had sensed to the left of the door had been a lure to draw my attention—a sudden, powerful presence that had flitted away in a moment to render my attack impotent.

They hadn't just baited me into a pointless counterattack—they'd taken my own honed senses and turned them against me by dividing and diverting my focus. I'd been pushed into losing two entire turns!

Their next move lacked the bloodthirst from before. Their body came flying in from my blind spot as they crashed into me, pinning me to the bed.

"Ngh..."

The impact on my chest knocked the wind out of me. I let out a surprised groan. By the time I'd even realized what was going on, my feet were off the floor and I was in no state to stop my tumble. Humans are irredeemably defenseless once you knock them off their feet—I didn't even have the wherewithal to cast a spell. When I caught my breath and regained some measure of cool, I used my Unseen Hands to rid myself of whatever it was that had clung onto my back.

Hands grabbed my head, forcing my face up from the bed. Dressed in my usual clothes, my neck was completely unprotected. I cast an Insulating Barrier a few millimeters from my skin to keep myself constantly protected, but how much could it take from a direct attack?

Then the final blow was struck—a crimson line cutting across my throat...

“You got me.”

“Hee hee, we can tally one more win for me.”

...left by Margit’s lipstick-coated fingertip.

There I was, pinned face down on my bed, with my partner Margit straddling my back.

Ugh, I didn’t notice her in the slightest! Who’d have thought she would have lain low on the ceiling, ready to pounce as soon as I got home?

If it hadn’t been my beautiful scout, I would have died just now. Not only would I have been forcibly parted from my body, I would have caused an incident at my senior’s inn.

“You’ve had a gloomy expression for a while now, but no matter your state of mind, that doesn’t mean you can drop your guard this much.”

“I can’t hide a thing from you, can I?”

Margit’s skills had blossomed quickly under the pressure of our newer, deadlier workload, and now her win ratio was three-to-seven in her favor. Just what skill had she used to get past my barrier spell?

Nothing screws you quite as hard as having your whole action economy shut down. Naturally, not every enemy could force you into such a state, and it took an incredible amount of experience to pull off, so I had tended to put it on the back burner at the table, but being OHKO’d was absolutely terrifying.

I couldn’t believe I’d ended up like this even with my own countermeasures.

“Did I really look so troubled? I was trying to act normally.”

“Do you really think I wouldn’t notice? Your desire to fix everything by yourself hasn’t changed at all.”

Margit gave my forehead a cheeky flick. I would have been fine, if it weren’t for the fact that she’d used her *thumb* with all the force you’d usually put into a big, dramatic coin flip. Reader, I was in agony.

Hmm? Usually she would’ve clambered off by now... Her legs are wrapped around me, and I can’t move an inch... With her weight on my back, I couldn’t

even shift my center of balance.

“Are you ready to tell me what happened? I watched you being called in.”

“Oh, yeah, well... Um...”

With Margit’s silent implication that any attempt to lie or weasel out of giving it to her straight would be at my own peril, I came clean about my meeting with Maxine Mia Rehmann.

The meeting was tense, but it ended up how I had expected. At the first glimpse of the net she meant to cast around me, I responded with every slippery rhetorical move, nonanswer, and feint in my repertoire.

Simply put, she had left me just enough room to believe that I could accept or deny her request as I pleased, disguising a fiendish battery of social, procedural, and financial traps. There had been no similar cases before me; she made it very difficult to deny her. If I hadn’t read the regulations from cover to cover, or if I hadn’t had my “prior engagement,” I might have been roped into something terrible.

“That seems like quite the tricky and intricate case. And you didn’t think to discuss this with me or the others at all?”

“I thought about it, but I didn’t want to tell you what amounted to baseless predictions. I mean, you know what Siegfried’s like...”

“He tends to get in over his head, it’s true.”

Margit snickered. I had no rebuttal. *Sorry, Sieg*.

Siegfried’s biggest dream was to become a hero. Part of that package was that once you got a few drinks in him, he’d start writing checks with his mouth that nothing in the world could cash. That was part of why I’d told him to leave the Golden Deer. He never said how much Baltlinden’s head had fetched us, but he *had* let slip that we’d sent him in alive and that we’d been praised for our hard work. That was cause enough to really wind up our less reputable cohorts. If people knew that you were going to receive a little cash prize from a noble, then the greedier among them might think to eliminate you beforehand.

By the same token, receiving praise or a letter of recommendation from folks

in high society wasn't the sort of thing you aired out to just everyone. If everybody knew whose pocket you were in, that made it all the easier for your patron's enemies to single you out.

So yeah, I'd tried to handle the situation on my own. It ran counter to my principles, but I had the background in the care and handling of nobles to make it work, and the less anyone knew what I was up to, the safer we'd all be.

"I realize that I am unable to help in that department, but I do wish you would have at least told me something."

I held my tongue for a moment.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I trust you utterly and completely, but things have a way of slipping out, even if you don't do anything wrong."

"Do you honestly think I would let things slip? Or that I would let myself get caught?"

Margit shifted above me. I felt her chin press atop my head. Her discontent was to be expected. Still, to quote a sage of my old world: *it is possible to commit no mistakes and still lose. That is not weakness; that is life.*

"If the enemy had a talented magus under them, then I think you would find it hard to resist. I don't doubt you can tough it out through a lot, but the folks we're dealing with, we can't put it past them to resort to taboo methods like psychosorcery. I've studied up on their methods, but even I wouldn't be able to fight back against a true pro."

Here, as on Earth, the chance that something might plow into your life like a runaway truck and smear it across the pavement was small, but *never zero*. At any rate, it wouldn't do to act so nonchalant when the local aristocracy was tied up in a panic like this.

You could fault me for being overprotective or a worrywart, but I'd already experienced a sudden and undignified death once before; what was I *supposed* to do? My pancreatic cancer had come on suddenly in my thirties and ripped my life away before I knew it. I couldn't help harboring these anxieties.

One day my loved ones might fall prey to a foe I couldn't just punch out. Time, the great apex predator of the universe, hung over us all. It promised a cruel

separation at the end of every story. You couldn't *get over* a fear that big.

If I kicked the bucket after jumping feet-first into a terrible ordeal, fully resolved to my fate, I wouldn't mind. It would be entirely my own fault. This was true of Margit and my two new comrades too. But for something to shatter what we had from out of the blue, just because the dice came up snake eyes? That was too much. I came by my love of fixed values honestly. A one-in-a-million chance of getting hosed seemed like good odds until you considered how small your part in the big machine is, and how many people there are who are just like you. That fringe outcome isn't a threat—to some poor bastard out there, it's a *guarantee*. It was a bit late coming, but I realized that this was at the root of my desire to author my own fate as much as I could this time around.

"You don't know until it happens, do you?"

"Depending on who you're faced with, you could be subject to anything. Some spells scrape at the surface of your thoughts, but other, better ones can read your mind without you even noticing."

The head of the School of Daybreak, the one person who stood toe to toe with my former employer—she was so utterly broken that Lady Agrippina chose endless fieldwork instead of dueling her—knew spells that would rip every secret from your brain, lay eggs in your psyche, ravage your every nerve ending, leave you with a fistful of new and debilitating personality traits, and then make you carry on with your day like nothing happened.

In the past, I had received a little lecture from her about anti-psychosorcery measures. Although it was true that the pervert was an unsalvageable menace, she had some semblance of a conscience, so although she had used her magic upon me, she hadn't probed right into the depths of my soul. Instead she revealed that she could lay bare all my surface thoughts. She could perfectly recite a twelve-digit figure I held in my head. During questioning, she could subconsciously lead my inner monologue to the answer she sought.

If we took that monstrous wraith as the gold standard for a magus, then ninety-nine percent of the world's magia would be lumped together as idiots. All the same, it was important for Margit to know the horrors that lurked in the

world of magic. This wasn't the same kind of thought policing that conspiracy theorists thought could be fixed with a tinfoil hat—it was the real deal.

In the world of upper-class nobles, preventative measures were as common as cleaning your house before a guest comes over. I wanted to be prudent.

Maxine was a tricky foe; even the margrave had trouble dealing with her. The Baden family and its offshoots were a formidable bloodline all on its own, but the margrave had found himself saddled with—when you got down to it—the Empire's exposed belly. It would be stupid to even think of underestimating such a foe.

That was why I wanted to put on a show to everyone that I didn't know anything more than I actually did. It was all to keep my beloved partner and my two friends out of the line of fire.

"You're such a fool."

I felt another sting in my head. It felt like she had just bit me.

"What do you expect me to do if you alone become our enemies' target and end up swarmed by a force you can't beat back? Just scraping together the intel I'd need to avenge you would stain my hands with the blood of dozens."

"I wouldn't want to see that."

Margit was right. I couldn't live a life where I shook my head in defiance at each seemingly insurmountable difficulty, especially when I had chosen to live the life of an adventurer based on my affection for a contradictory system that loved fixed values.

"And I suppose leaving Marsheim crossed your mind too?"

"I *really* can't hide anything from you."

I was used to being an open book in front of Margit, but I felt a strange mixture of pleasure and fear having her strike the bull's-eye time and time again. Having someone who understood you was a rare and precious thing, but having my heart picked clean like this reaffirmed to me that the min-maxed build I dreamed of was still a ways away.

I loved the idea of being totally OP and ultimately efficient enough to solve

anything on my own, but that was harder than it looked on paper. With Margit's warm weight on top of me, I started to feel that such an end point would be utterly dull. The mind is such a fickle creature.

"It was just a thought."

When I was considering the routes available to me, moving our base of activities from Marsheim had certainly crossed my mind. Staying here could mire us even deeper with all these damned landlords. If I took a wrong turn and ended up down a path where I had to give up the adventuring life, my soul might break.

How many choices had I thrown away until now for the sake of this life?

I was certain that I would find a way to go on even if my dreams were stoppered, but it wouldn't be the same fun table I was currently sitting at. It would be a sequel put out thanks to some obligation no one would enjoy. *I mean, if things got that bad, maybe I would...* It wasn't my fault that such pessimism would rear its ugly head.

"You really are incredible, Margit. Have you been a magus all this time?"

"When it comes to you, I can see everything," Margit said, her lips pressed close to my ear as she wrapped her arms around my neck.

...Why did it feel so good to be ensnared so tightly that I was as still as a corpse?

"It's because I know you that I can say with certainty that wherever you go, whatever job you may do, you will end up standing out and shouldering the exact same worries."

"Gack..."

"Does the prospect of a life of adventure dispirit you that much?"

As soon as Margit said these words, it felt as if the fog obscuring my vision suddenly cleared. It was exactly as she said. I needed to remember what I had done at the table in my old world again and again—exterminate everything around me that restricted me from being the master of my own fate. No matter how crazy it was of me, no matter how obstinate, I would let my tongue and my

two fists carry me to freedom.

It didn't matter how much wider society would criticize us for being heartless—rather, we had to puff out our chests, put on our biggest smiles, and announce that *this* was how a true player moved. I had been so enamored by this life that I had thrown away everything I hadn't needed to get here. How could I have been so blind?

"If you told me now that you had forgotten our promise, then I might just break out in tears. I might not know just how hard I should be holding you."

"You're totally right. We promised we wouldn't half-ass this."

Although the finer details would be different, this problem would follow us wherever we may go. It was stupid for an adventurer who wanted to one day save a world or two to back down now. One day we would be taking down the leader of a knight's order—no, a veritable demon lord. A true player character would throw themselves at every adventure hook they saw with their whole heart exposed!

A sudden death? Bring it on, then. It wasn't just me for whom death might come knocking at any moment—my former employer, the Emperor, the lowest peasant, and the oldest and most fearsome god anyone could care to name were all alike in the hungry eyes of chance. I couldn't be sitting here twiddling my thumbs with my brow furrowed in worry—that just wouldn't be cool.

"You always grab my hand and pull me forward in times like these. Whenever I start to err toward compromise, you always remind me of how I used to be."

"I told you, didn't I? I will always watch your back, so that perilous shadows will not tread on you. That includes *your own*."

Man... This childhood friend of mine was so sweet, but so terrifying—deathly strict, but lovingly kind. She steadied my wavering heart and forced me to remember what it was I really wanted.

"To the ends of the earth in the west. To beyond the Southern Sea."

As I recited the words, warm nostalgia filling my breast (had I really only said them a year ago now?), Margit answered in kind.

“To the snowcaps of the north. To the desert sands covering the east. That was our promise.”

We laughed together. It felt as if a sudden spring breeze were tickling a meadow of sun-kissed flowers.

“Ah, buuut...”

Words failed me. As Margit’s bewitchingly seductive voice tickled my ear, a shock went through my brain and my body tightened in response. I felt something *wet*.

Margit. Was. Licking. My. Ear.

“Bad boys who have lost their vim need to be given a little extra lesson.”

“Hold th— What are you doing?!”

I wasn’t sure if it was for only seconds, minutes, or even hours—the thrilling, unknown sensations that ran through me made it impossible to think straight. I wasn’t sure if the sun was still high in the sky, or if twilight had fallen; the ticklish, pleasant feeling coursed through my brain, leaving me numb to all else.

“Now, if my memory is correct, I remember you boasting to Siegfried about how important one’s first ‘body’ was.”

“Y-Yeah, but that was about battle!”

“You still *waver* so! Clearly your manhood needs a more *lasting* adjustment...”

Margit’s face as she leaned in was as beautiful and as terrifying as ever.

[Tips] Even if it is the woman who instigates the act, it’s a strange fact that most languages and cultures still portray the man as “stealing” her virginity.

“Hey, man. Whoa, what’s with you?”

“I could ask you the same thing, Siegfried.”

The next day, after passing an intimate and sweet and *exhausting* time together with Margit, we popped by Siegfried and Kaya’s place.

The usually energetic hero-hopeful looked gaunt and utterly defeated.

“Oh no...” I said. “You didn’t—”

“L-Listen! You gotta hear me out!”

One glance at the disgruntled-looking herbalist poised over her new equipment told me everything I needed to know.

“I was only thinking of Kaya!”

“Yes, but I think it a bit odd that you bought new equipment *and* silk fabric all without consulting me, Dee.”

It made complete sense that my comrade didn’t even have the backbone to push back against her refusal to use his nom de guerre. He had really stepped in it this time. It was totally natural for Kaya to be fuming.

“I can’t believe you went on a big spending spree as soon as you got paid *again*...”

Of course, I wasn’t going to fight in his corner. It seemed like he had received quite the lecture already, so I wouldn’t lay it on any thicker, but I also wasn’t about to offer any false sympathy.

“N-No, you got it wrong! I was gonna talk to her! B-But I wanted to see some samples first...”

“You can’t ask them to bring out so many and then say you don’t want any, Dee.”

To anyone else, Kaya would have seemed completely normal, but the way she stressed Sieg’s name proved she was this close to going *nuclear*. What kind of sick luck did we have to get chewed out by our partners on almost the same day? Two peas in a pod, huh...

“Oh, Sieg... You’re a one-in-a-million guy.”

I found myself covering my face with a hand and letting out a big sigh.

He was like your stereotypical dad who wanted to be generous to his kids and had no idea *how*. You could hang him up in a frame for posterity, and generations of women would come to nod and grimace at a textbook example of a grown man who still needed mothering.

It looked like he had learned a lesson or two. He had given Kaya full rein over the expenses and received an allowance from her—that was progress. But it was a rookie mistake to buy presents for someone directly from the merchant without getting an intermediary to help.

“C-C’mon, I literally only asked to see the samples! Honest! I’ll pay, and if you don’t like it I’ll sell them on!”

“You were the one who said they were trying to lure people in. If you say you don’t need their goods after getting them to bring ’em out, then their reputation as a merchant takes a hit. It was quite something that they would even serve us. We’ve only just shook off our soot...”

Kaya hadn’t looked up a single time as she ground down some herbs. She made no effort to hide her anger.

Sieg didn’t know a thing about fancier stores nor did he realize the weight of asking to see the merchant personally. Knowing what someone wanted was a simple but powerful piece of information—in sales or in spycraft.

“Hufeland Trading and the flagship Acronym store don’t usually serve

adventurers. Even if we were to visit, they are somewhat above our station."

"Oof, you aren't kidding—those are *big* names..."

Hufeland Trading was a pharmaceuticals store; they traded not just in the raw materials, but in high-end equipment. The whole business was propped up by the Baldur Clan so they'd have a legitimate vendor to work through, and our ties with them had probably helped in Sieg's negotiations. We'd already both been buying catalysts from Nanna's wholesaler, so it was no surprise they knew our name.

However, Acronym was a legitimate veteran store with outlets in the capital. It wasn't simply a luxury brand geared toward customers with deep pockets—no, it was one of Marsheim's premier clothes dealers, and they generally only dealt with nobles. They were famous for directly dealing in the highest-quality silks, crafted with traditional methods from the Hierarchy.

I wanted to applaud Siegfried for having the cojones to stroll straight in. It was obvious to anyone that it only catered nobles! I'd passed by once before and been amazed that a business with such an esteemed history could be found in Marsheim too.

That guy picked the weirdest times to be a real go-getter.

"Y-You gotta understand! The receptionist lady said that everyone would like to have that fabric once in their lives!"

"Exactly! That's how incredible their stock is! So expensive that you could only afford *one* with your whole life's savings! Their cheapest fabric was five drachmae, Dee. That's more than your spear ran you!"

I wondered whether the catalyst in Kaya's hand was *supposed* to glow that dangerously...or if it was reacting to her roiling heart.

This ain't good.

Joy was easily overcome by righteous anger. It would take a little time for the dust to settle here. The fact that she was busying herself with her medicines in order to regain her composure spoke well enough of how this had shaken her. She hadn't brought out tea because she loved Siegfried and didn't want to let her true feelings slip as we sat and caught up.

What a troublesome turn of events. I placed my hand on my forehead as I pondered how best to move the conversation forward, when Siegfried, equally awkward, asked me a question with a curious expression.

“By the way...how come neither of you are sitting down? And how come you’re holding Margit up instead of letting her hang off you like normal?”

“I could tell you, but then I’d have to kill you.”

Margit’s voice was far lower and more lethargic than usual; it stunned Siegfried into silence. She was hanging off me like she always did, but today I was holding up her spider body with my hands. It was my fault, really—I got a little bit carried away. At any rate, Margit no longer had the energy to dangle with her own strength as she usually did, and she couldn’t walk around that easily. It was an unfortunate necessity.

I asked her if she wanted to take the day off, or at least call it a half day, but she said checking in on Kaya and Siegfried was a pressing matter. She’d been right to push the matter. If we’d taken any longer there was no telling what other corporate entities our friends might have drawn the ire of.

“Anyway,” I said, “we’ve got something to discuss. I thought it was something I could tidy up and not bother any of you with, but unfortunately it’s spread a bit wider than expected.”

“Wider? Whaddya mean?”

A good GM could just gloss the stuff everyone at the table already knew; I found myself wishing I could do the same. Even if my own personal skills were out of a TRPG handbook, this was a world as real as any other.

Erich explains the situation to Siegfried and Kaya, and they move on to figuring out their next move. How easy it had been back then to just skip ahead! It was nominally metagaming, but only a truly *obnoxious* player would raise a fuss about this sort of streamlining. On top of that, as long as the GM didn’t leave out anything *new*, the truth was nothing more and nothing less than what they’d said.

“So, uh, should I start with shouting at you for getting me wrapped up in this shit?” Siegfried replied.

“Hey, we all were in that ichor maze together, so it’s not *purely* my fault. Don’t you remember what we discussed at the camp back then?”

“Agh, yeah, right... I totally forgot. It’d be totally unheroic of me to blow up about it now...”

The day before we found the ichor maze, I told Siegfried that when a right-thinking adventurer found themselves in a trap, they’d either evade it and administer a sound beating to the perpetrator, or fight tooth and nail to escape the trap and *then* administer a sound beating to the perpetrator. Siegfried had berated me, saying that it was barbaric, but in the end he saw my logic.

Siegfried scratched his head with a look of utter despondency before sitting back down and kicking his legs out onto the table.

“Fine, you got it. Whether we skirt around this thing or dive right into it, we’re gonna pay a few ‘fists of recompense’ to whoever threw us into this.”

“Dee?”

“Ah, sorry!”

The hero-hopeful swiftly removed his feet from the table before he got chewed out any more—clearly a long-standing habit of his. He wasn’t helping his standing with Kaya. *We don’t put our feet where our food goes, young man.*

“Well, worst comes to worst, you can move base until things die down. You’re just as much a target as I am. I expect that Acronym were so genteel with you because they mean to take you in.”

“Uh, take us in?”

“What do you think is an adventurer’s greatest weakness?”

“Women and booze.”

I nodded with approval, but hurried to move the conversation along—I’d noticed Kaya’s ear twitching.

“Yes, but none of us are that sort of adventurer. So they’ve set their targets elsewhere. In my case, they’ve been playing on my conservatism and my perennial weakness for authority.”

“Uhh, so I ain’t received that good an education, but...what? I don’t remember those words meaning whatever you think they do!”

Rude so-and-so... I was extremely cautious about my public image and wanted to bail the second a situation started looking politically relevant. If that wasn’t “conservative,” what was?!

“Oh, Erich. I’m not sure whether to laugh or worry at the idea that anyone who throws themselves onto swords and spears for a living is *risk-averse*,” Margit said with a chuckle. “Ah! It hurts to laugh...”

“You just ain’t convincing when *you’re* the one who spends time rubbin’ elbows with creepy-ass clans,” Siegfried said.

“Sorry, Erich—they’re not *wrong*,” Kaya added.

I huffed in the face of all three of them rebuffing me so easily, but if I got in a little verbal spat right now, we would never get anywhere. I held my tongue, for the moment at least. It’s not like I hadn’t considered that I came off differently to folks than I did to myself. I just thought that my intentions were pretty obvious.

Anyway, I was the adult here, so I wouldn’t get mad. I had come of age twice now! It wouldn’t be double-grown-up of me to hold a grudge.

I just, you know, wouldn’t forget this moment as long as I lived. Possibly longer, depending on whether my whole reincarnation deal was a one-off or not.

“Moving on,” I said, “I think we can all agree Siegfried loves drama and can’t budget to save his life.”

Being vengeful wouldn’t be double-grown-up of me either. That absolutely *wasn’t* what I was doing. Sieg let out an audible *oof*.

My dear comrade had been taken for a *ride* at those stores. He wasn’t the most savvy when it came to a woman’s tastes, so I could easily see him asking the nice receptionist lady for advice. After all, it wouldn’t take half a day to investigate and find out that our connections were pretty thin on the ground. Siegfried didn’t have many other friends to go to for advice, and I knew he wouldn’t come to me about this kind of stuff. This was something anyone could

dig up on him. It would be easy to set him down the wrong path with a little bit of pushing at his weak points.

“I know you went in of your own accord, but I think they set measures to draw you there. And then they gave you an offer you couldn’t refuse.”

“So they set me up?”

“I can’t think of anything else it could be. I know you’re amber-orange now, but they wouldn’t sell to you otherwise. Unless you had an invitation, a rookie adventurer would be turned away at the door—myself included, naturally.”

Both Siegfried and I were underfed brats, still shy of twenty summers—such a luxury store was far above our station. Unless someone trustworthy invited us to browse, they wouldn’t even give us a tiny scrap to go home with. It wasn’t a matter of whether you could fork over the cash or not. The sales world was beyond my ken, but even I knew that a store’s reputation hinged on who they allowed in.

“Hm? Hold on a sec...”

“I suppose next would be a jeweler,” I said. “Kaya, you don’t have many accessories. I bet they’ll come up to you saying that your neck is looking awfully lonely.”

“I said hold on a sec! Can you—”

“Or Acronym might approach again with the draw of their new season of fabric.”

“Grah! I said *hold on*! Did you just say I was amber-orange now?!”

Siegfried had leaped over the table and grabbed at my lapel as he cut me off. I gave a slow nod, as if to pull him along just for a moment. Wait, no, not “as if”—I was *totally* pushing his buttons.

I had found out when I saw the manager yesterday. The letter of acknowledgment for taking down Jonas Baltlinden had finally been issued, and Maxine had said she was considering Siegfried’s promotion, judging the general public atmosphere. I suspected her and the margrave’s plans were at the heart of it. I could understand that they hadn’t wanted to create too many

“exceptions” last autumn, but it was weird that she would bring it up now, of all times. I expected that the promotion was part of the snare she’d prepared for him.

In this case, if a noble’s request came from somewhere else, then there was no worry that their own social standing would be harmed. I wasn’t sure whether she wanted to create a rift in the party or bring us closer together, but I knew that there was some ulterior motive there, since she’d bothered to bring it up with me directly.

In all honesty, if a friend of mine was doing well, I was more inclined to congratulate them than start stewing. I wasn’t so small a person to hold feelings of jealousy or estrangement. Which is not to say I *couldn’t* hate them forever if I ended up stuck on a long campaign headed nowhere in particular.

Putting that aside, I wanted Siegfried and Kaya to know that this promotion was both a carrot and a stick.

“Listen well, comrades. You’re going to be pushed into overspending to an extent that your adventuring successes won’t be able to keep pace with. It’s just as Kaya said. If you had turned down that merchant, then they would have put a black mark on your name and written you off as one more uncouth adventurer.”

“And in order to make up the cash, they’d force requests on me that I wouldn’t take otherwise?”

Bingo. I was glad he caught on quick. He was a little impulsive, but he was proof that a lack of education didn’t make you an idiot.

“Exactly. Once you make one purchase, that’s it. You’ll find yourself in Margrave Marsheim’s lap before you know it, unable to turn down any dirty request he asks of you. Records of your promotion will reach other Associations, and once you’ve worked up a big enough debt, you’ll have nowhere to run.”

“Graaaah! Firk ding blast!”

I wondered if Sieg’s D100 had landed pretty badly, because as soon as he’d recognized what I was steering at, he laid his head on the table and clutched at

his scalp. I knew he was a tenacious guy, but maybe this was too much. I hoped it was only a temporary fit of madness.

“Gn...’s...ld...”

“Excuse me?”

“Gnitaheidr’s gold...” he said, his voice so full of malice that you could see its trajectory straight into the lowest vaults of hell.

The phrase came from the tale of the original Siegfried—Sieg’s role model.

If I remembered correctly, it was the name of a story where Siegfried, desperate to cross deadly waters, was swindled by the ferryman into surrendering all the spoils of his next adventure. The episode ended with Siegfried clearing a labyrinth loaded with cursed gold, hoisting the ferryman by his own petard.

“It’s just like that. I won’t be used and tossed aside. No way. I’ll get my revenge somehow.”

It was one of the rare episodes that went largely unchanged from the prototypical Sigurd tales in the revised version for the masses. It was a beloved plot—who doesn’t like to see a swindler get their just deserts? I believed there was one small difference, though—in the later version, Siegfried offers his hand to the ferryman, ruined by the cursed gold, and gives him a second chance; in the original, Sigurd simply leaves in the ferryman’s boat. It was during his journey home with this stolen boat that Sigurd was swallowed by the waves and met a watery end.

My comrade had perhaps chosen a slightly inauspicious story to project upon.

“Part of the whole point of gettin’ into the hero business was to show the folks back home what I could do. If I pack up my bags and move elsewhere, I can’t do that.”

Sieg was as superstitious as any good adventurer, so I was a bit uncertain whether to mention the untoward ending of Sigurd’s story. His voice held all its usual vigor, even with his face planted firmly on the table.

“My hometown still means a lot to me. Gramps’s grave is there. I’ll do the

extra work for Illfurth's sake."

"Your revenge plan seems a little more than extra work."

"The bastards...trying to make a fool out of me. I'll get even, same as Siegfried. They'll rue the day they crossed me."

It was slightly less encouraging to hear when his face and the table were still so intimate, but he had the right spirit. It looked like he had successfully passed this Sanity check.

"Anyway, it's you we're talking about. I bet you've got a plan already. Go on, spill it. I'll do anything if it means becoming a proud adventurer."

"Oh, you said you'll do *anything*?"

"Uh, yeah, I did?"

Siegfried finally raised his head, looking at me like he was wondering if I'd gone deaf. I coughed and tried to change the subject.

Ugh, why'd I say that? I can't even remember what the original reference was, but it's one of those things I let slip. There's no way he'd even know! I expected it was from some kind of popular meme, but not one that I would be proud to say I knew.

"Anyway, yeah, I've got an idea. It'll protect our dignity, let us keep adventuring, and protect Marsheim by fostering a situation that'll show the local strongmen what's what."

In truth, I was glad of Siegfried's resolve to help me. The path we were to tread might not have been as heroic as some of the legends, but we were living in the modern age—he had to accept that.

I tried my best to give a big smile and laid bare my idea.

[Tips] Sometimes words or phrases slip into our everyday vernacular without us remembering that they were originally from some internet meme. It happens more easily when more regular turns of phrase get used in the "source material."

The power words have to intentionally alter one's position—in other words,

one's existence—can be leveraged to political ends more deadly than ten thousand swords.

"Oooof..."

The young herbalist felt a strange pang of jamais vu at the sight of her party member groaning on the bed. Where Kaya had been groaning due to her own embarrassment, Margit seemed to be suffering from physical pain.

"Are you feeling okay? You've looked a bit under the weather ever since you arrived. I'm still but a novice herbalist, but if you tell me your symptoms I can prepare something for you."

"Mmf... No, it's quite all right. I'm in pain, but it is not all that bad. It's more like a...lethargic feeling. A heaviness, like my spine has been replaced with lead."

The two of them were in Kaya's personal room, taking a small rest after the guys went out to enact their schemes. When the news about the sheer *size* of the bounty Kaya had won left her reeling from the stress, Margit had been the one looking after *her*. Now the tables had turned; the arachne lay sprawled out, chest down, clutching a pillow tightly in her arms. Kaya felt more vulnerable than she might have expected.

Ordinarily the party would all have headed out together. They were less vulnerable to the city's predations in one group, and even if there was no real danger, it just made more sense for the party to move as one during negotiations. But their scout—the one most fit to watch over them in a covert position—was in no condition to work, let alone stand up, so Erich and Siegfried had headed out alone.

Kaya had noticed that something was wrong with Margit the moment she had come in through the door. Her education on how to be a refined woman might have only been passed down from her mother, but Kaya had cultivated her social manners through self-study. She worked patiently and magnanimously, able to phase out her presence like the last embers of incense should the situation require.

She pondered what could have happened to the huntress. It couldn't have

been a job—Erich and Margit had said that they wanted at least ten days to just find some simple joy in being alive, and had thus sworn off work during this interim.

It was during this time that Siegfried had his unfortunate run-in with some overly persuasive merchants. Kaya had been well and truly happy that her closest friend was the sort of person to openly chat about what she might like to receive instead of forcing presents upon her under the expectation of receiving a thank-you, but even though she had been right there, things had proceeded too quickly for her to stop them. After looking at the bill, there was no possible way that Kaya could remain calm.

During the meeting with Erich and Margit, Kaya had her frustration on display for everyone to see, fed out in little fits and starts so that it wouldn't bubble over in one go. Now, with Margit in front of her, looking well and utterly drained, she couldn't help but be pulled back to her usual frame of mind.

"You seem thoroughly pooped. It wasn't from the job, was it? Oh! You didn't have some kind of falling out, did you?"

"Oh, no, not that sort of thing. How do I put this... I've never felt exhausted in *this* manner before, so it's hard for me to put into words."

"In...what manner?"

Margit furrowed her brow for a few moments, but concluded that it would be no good to keep secrets between friends. She decided she was happy to have another girls' talk with Kaya. They had laid their hearts bare to one another before—a little more embarrassment shared would only amount to some gentle teasing at the bar later.

"I'm just presuming, but you two haven't done it yet, have you?"

"Done what?"

That wasn't all—even though Margit and Kaya were of different races, the huntress felt that her own experiences might be of some use to her friend. Unable to put what she had done into words without endless euphemisms muddying the water, Margit did a little gesture with her hands—one that, back in Erich's old world, would have been heavily censored.

Kaya was still green in the ways of the world, but she had spent a year living in the thick of Marsheim's adventuring community; thanks to rude strangers on the street, she was not *completely* naive to the gesture's meaning. It did take a moment or two for her to realize what Margit was intimating, but when she did, her face went bright red.

"O-Oh, n-no, n-nothing! I-I haven't...with D-Dee, I..."

"Okay, okay, enough of that. Your innocence is giving me heartburn."

Margit grinned at seeing Kaya flap her hands in front of her in a desperate attempt to explain her situation.

"Oh! D-Does that mean...?" With a pounding heart and fiery ears, Kaya cottoned to the meaning of Margit's lazy smile. The more romantic expression would be that she was a woman now. To put it in more uncouth and direct terms, she'd absolutely *taken it to pound town*.

"Wh-Why n-now of all times?!"

"Why, you say? I'm almost nineteen. I think it would be stranger if I had zero interest in it, don't you think?"

For the young herbalist, whose pure and innocent heart chose to construe her romance with Siegfried as stemming from "resolve," the truth behind the arachne's lethargy was all too much. She covered her face with her hands, unable to look her friend in the eye. It didn't matter that Kaya hadn't seen a single thing happen. Margit's attitude and openness meant that she couldn't *not* think about it. Her thoughts had turned so frantic that her cerebellum was on the verge of fusing under the heat of it all. Kaya almost regretted being so close with Margit and Erich—she couldn't stop herself from visualizing the scene Margit so unsubtly hinted at.

"There were a few other reasons too. For starters, that boy was getting awfully worked up about this whole situation. That, and I realized that life is a fickle thing in our line of work—why *not* take the plunge? After all, I had been prepared to die of starvation countless times in the ichor maze."

Despite Kaya's utter embarrassment, Margit carried on. She was blushing hot enough to boil a kettle, so why did the young herbalist find herself adjusting her

fingers so that she could peep at Margit with one eye?

“No one—man or woman—wants to leave this world with regrets. That’s why I thought to pluck up my courage and make a move. I surmised that it would revitalize him at least as much as me. I don’t think there’s much wrong with dispensing with my regrets now, *before* I’m at death’s door.”

After all this, Kaya would be a truly unique and otherworldly young woman if she chose to change the topic now.

“S-So you made the first move?”

“Indeed I did. And this is what I have to show for it.”

“Did it...hurt? I mean...you are in quite the state.”

Kaya’s usual temperament would never have dared allow her to ask such a shameful thing, but her curiosity was too strong. Margit was no longer merely her senior in age alone; even Kaya’s usual prim and proper presentation couldn’t prevent her from delving deeper.

“Interestingly enough, it didn’t at all. I suppose it’s because I’m an arachne. Even compared to other demihumans, we’re, ah, *laid out a little differently*.”

Kaya was completely at a loss, much to her dismay. Now, it would be extremely uncouth to delve into the details of what had passed between the two lovebirds, but it should be known that although arachne and mensch had different makeups to their womanhood, the pleasure from the act was the same.

“The problem, I think, was doing it seven times in one night.”

“S-Seven times?!”

Kaya couldn’t help but squeak a little. Although not yet of her mother’s caliber, Kaya was still a healer. Her anatomical readings had furnished her with a passable grasp of the physiologies of most peoples of the Empire—Rhinian academe *loved* a good dissection—so she understood the “tab A into slot B” side of mensch reproduction well enough. Naturally, she was familiar with the fact that mensch lacked mating seasons, and so could increase their numbers at almost any time they wished. That dreadful monthly visitor made this painfully

clear.

This didn't mean mensch had limitless sexual potential. According to the extensive studies of a certain historically famous physician—a man who had earned renown as the medical god of the Southern Sea in the Age of Antiquity—the typical mensch could only sustain *two to four* sequential sessions, on average during a normal cycle of activity. Forgetting the public criticisms he had earned as a "lecherous creep," the results of his research had suggested that on a purely physical level, a mensch could go that far and no further. This should have counted double for two inexperienced lovers.

"I honestly don't know how things ended up this way. The first time was good. I took the lead—you know, playing the role of the more worldly older woman, telling him how lucky he was to have a guide like me."

"You t-took the lead..." Kaya murmured to herself, still flushing terribly.

"I managed to keep that act up until we wrapped up with the second time, and by then I was too absorbed in the afterglow to keep my nerves all tamped down."

"You managed two times just like that?!"

Kaya couldn't hide her face any longer. Now she was clutching tightly onto her robe, leaning forward to catch Margit's next words.

“But I suppose Erich had forgone all nervousness by then. It turned into a back-and-forth that neither of us could stop. We tried all sorts of things, and by the time we were done and I wasn’t sure just how many times I had peaked, I was completely exhausted.”

As if moving to match Kaya’s interest, the huntress spared no detail in laying bare the events of the day before.

There was no way for Margit to know this, but Erich’s mental state had been swept along with the desires of his more youthful younger body, which had driven him to make a surprising number of “purchases.” Pleasure in sex came from mutual love and passion, but also from familiarity and dexterous technique. Yes, even *this* activity stood to benefit from a successful DEX roll. And so the stressed young man in the height of his second youth sought to overcome the strain of his work and any lingering setbacks about his performance in *that* area through his own unique shopping spree.

Goldilocks had reached Divine Favor in the bedroom. Not only that, his various traits had allowed him many more actions, so to speak—hence Margit’s current state. Seeing his arachne lover, a species with heightened senses compared to mensch, respond with such pleasure surely must have struck Erich’s heartstrings.

“You see, arachne are hunters who often lie in wait before making our move and getting the job done in a flash. That means our endurance is hardly much to write home about. I’ve spent five days on the hunt without eating, all for the sake of catching my prey—but despite that, never have I experienced such exhaustion as I have now.”

“W-Wooow...”

“My abdominal muscles are throbbing. I get these sudden dizzy spells, and my stomach just starts throbbing. My body feels so heavy, and it makes me wonder if this fatigue will ever disappear.”

“Wow...”

“How strange it is that people derive pleasure from something that can be such agony. The sheets were in quite a state afterward, so it was difficult to

launder them without anyone catching on.”

“Wooow...”

The herbalist could only muster iterations on the same few single-syllable replies. The heavy air from the difficult conversation from earlier had been blown away. When Siegfried came home later that day, he saw an expression on his partner’s face like nothing he had never seen before.

[Tips] There are a number of TRPGs which include mechanical support for sexual intercourse as a negotiation method. Unfortunately, people in hard times offering cheap service have been known to let greed take over and end a foolish adventurer’s story before it could even approach a conclusion.

Siegfried only realized he was sweating when the salty bead reached his lips.

After the past winter’s adventure, the hero-hopeful had finally developed the confidence that he was a proper man, not just a wannabe who talked big. All the same, he couldn’t suppress the wave of fear that was running through him right now. The guts he had hardened in the fire of battle seemed to shrink as he received glares from every goon in the dodgiest joint in the neighborhood. Unfortunately for Siegfried, he was still untested on this front. As they sat in the Inky Squid, Siegfried cursed Erich—his cohort and, he was coming to acknowledge, his *comrade*—for bringing him to such a terrifying place. All in the safety of his internal monologue, mind you.

Siegfried’s brain was going into overdrive parsing his situation. Yes, he had said he would do anything. He dreamed of being the sort of hero who could leap to answer any call to action. But this was different! He was in a notorious hideout for bloodthirsty adventurers; there wasn’t a soul in sight who didn’t look like they’d happily cut his throat as soon as look at him. How the hell could Erich have just wandered in here without an appointment?!

If the young adventurer had possessed the means to ignore the pressure coming down on him, he would have taken Erich by the lapels and read him the riot act right then and there.

We need to build enough connections so that we don’t lose to any

organization—that was what Erich had said, so why in all the gods' names were they here, in one of the most terrifying places not only in Marsheim, but the entirety of Ende Erde?!

The logic held up. It had irked him a little to see Erich drive home the point as if talking to a child, but even Siegfried understood what it meant to get so strong that no one wanted to mess with you.

Siegfried admired the idea of going it solo, just like his epic heroic namesake, but this option had been shut away ever since he decided that he and Kaya were in this thing together. Not only that, he wasn't a complete dreamer—he knew that they couldn't immediately obtain the kind of power and clout that would shield them from the political gamesmanship of the city's movers and shakers. As he saw it, the quickest method to insure themselves would be to either find some sort of politically powerful backing or become the head honcho of a group that people kept their distance from. They had begun plotting because they didn't like the former option, so here they were, trying to achieve the latter.

Although neither young adventurer wanted to start a clan, they realized that they would need to form some sort of loose coalition to elevate their status. Siegfried had decided to tag along with Erich in his plan to approach a senior adventurer for advice, but he could never have foreseen that they would end up at the Inky Squid.

It stank of blood and cheap booze. In every dark corner—the joint *abounded* with dark corners—the clientele sharpened daggers and polished arrowheads. It had the look of your textbook pit of vipers, top to bottom. Other establishments, like the Golden Deer, might have conveyed a bleaker picture with their babbling, dejected drunkards and hardest of hard-luck cases, but none were quite so chilling as this.

"So you're alive. Rumor mill was starting to think otherwise, you've been out of sight so long."

The most terrifying person in the room was the ogress sitting right at the back of the tavern. Siegfried had never encountered a thinking being of her sheer *scale*. She was beautiful—her easy posture in her chair made her seem more

like a bronze statue than a person—but she radiated an aura of menace that left him feeling like his balls were retreating to higher ground. He was certain he wasn't the first to feel that way, nor would be the last. From the azure luster of her skin under the candlelight, Siegfried knew that even his precious new spear could never pierce it. Even her copper hair had a sophisticated, martial aura about it: unkempt, but not untidy.

Her exhaustion and ennui had abandoned her. Whispers of that fatigue and the shadows of dark circles under her eyes remained, but the ogress's might was honed once again, all traces of rust meticulously polished away—she was more than enough to set a newbie adventurer who had only done a few big jobs quivering in his boots.

"Then again, I knew you weren't the sort to get himself killed, so none of us here gave a damn what the rumors said. Right?" she went on, gesturing to her underlings.

Coarse peals of laughter came from her cohorts; they cackled and hooted at Goldilocks. Siegfried just couldn't understand how his fellow, this man with whom he had shared bowl after bowl of tasteless gruel in the ichor maze, could just stand and take all this laughter.

"I must apologize for the awful delay in my New Year's greetings," Erich said. "I was snowed in with quite the job."

How could Goldilocks act so coolly in front of this languorous beauty? Any regular person would find themselves prostrated on the floor begging for her forgiveness, whether or not they'd *done* anything. Siegfried found Goldilocks as strange as ever as he switched from that usual shady, half-smirking air of his to a totally elegant, well-mannered metropolitan dialect. Siegfried couldn't put into words why Goldilocks's civility seemed so fishy to him. It was as if some nameless, grasping horror, its shape impossible to pin down, dwelled beneath the surface of his shadow.

In truth, Erich was not that different from Siegfried—a foolish, sentimental boy who only had eyes for adventure.

"Oh, I *thought* you seemed a little more refined than before—you were on a journey, I see. And what, pray tell, was your esteemed victory against?"

“Nothing to write home about. We simply brought an end to a grudge that had been festering for many, many years.”

“No, no, no, that won’t do at all. Your modesty pulls the wool over people’s eyes! At least give the foe you vanquished the dignity of praise. You might as well spit in my face otherwise!”

A chill ran through Siegfried at these last words. Had he heard her correctly? Piecing together the unspoken context, Siegfried could only presume that Goldilocks had beaten this mighty warrior...

“It was an adventure that lasted all of winter. Hah—I was more concerned that we would die from starvation than a blade to the heart.”

“Ahh, a war of attrition. Yes, quite the beast to struggle with. We, too, would be nothing without our supplies. As you can see, we’re all big eaters. The battlefield back home was quite awful, I’ll tell you. We ended up rushing the enemy to steal their horses for meat.”

The ogress let out a bellowing laugh, then set an elbow to her knee and rested her head in her palm, and fixed Siegfried firmly in her gaze. The young adventurer felt like that golden glare of hers was picking him apart, as if he were prey in the jaws of a great eagle. He instinctively dropped his center of gravity—knees slightly bent, weight in his hips: the stance he took when holding his spear. Thinking they had only come to talk, he hadn’t brought even a dirk.

“Now *you* look like a *warrior*. Name?”

She smiled; it spoke to the gesture’s origins not as a sign of mirth, but a show of one’s fangs. Hers were large even for an ogre.

“The name... My name is Siegfried of Illfurth.”

The answer came without thought, without pause. Sieg knew, in the depths of his primeval rodent brain, that to freeze now would only invite the beast before him to lunge. Caught in her long shadow, he found his usual raw manner replaced with all the courtesy he knew how to express. The three he now spent the most time with all used palatial speech, and he had unwittingly absorbed some of the fundamentals.

“Very good. I am Laurentius the Free, of the Gargantuan Tribe. I hope we may

continue this acquaintance.”

“O-Of course.”

It seemed that the hero-hopeful had passed the ogress’s test. If this had been the Laurentius Erich had first met—the listless apex predator feasting upon the tasty morsels her underlings brought to her—Siegfried would be screaming his head off in the yard in a few minutes.

“I am pleased that you have found someone worthy of holding the reins beside you on the battlefield. Ah, not that an ogre would know anything of how a horse feels in the saddle. We just know they go *squish-crunch*.”

Laurentius’s guffaw rang high up into the ceiling. Upon finishing her appraisal of Goldilocks’s ally, the ogre warrior jabbed her chin at the waiter standing with a bored expression behind the bar counter—*bring out the booze.*

“So, then. I doubt that you came to visit to assuage my boredom now, did you?” she said to Erich.

“Your intuition is as sharp as ever.”

“You didn’t seem as if you were up for another dance. You need warriors for a battle? I can send some if need be.”

Laurentius didn’t need to explicate the mutual understanding that a worthy payment would be required. The barkeep came over and poured drinks for the three of them. The mugs were large, but as Laurentius picked hers up, it looked like a little medicine bottle in her hand. For the two mensch, on the other hand, it was quite the drink.

“Ugh...”

Siegfried couldn’t help but flinch as he caught a whiff of the fumes that wafted up from it. He had an average tolerance for an Imperial subject, and it wasn’t as if he didn’t like a stiff drink; still, it was his first time faced with this type of liquor.

Erich took a swift sip without a flinch before letting out a satisfied sound.

“Mmm... Very good. Gin from the northern isles, I presume?”

“I’ve been taking on more gigs to wake up this rusty body of mine. I feel

stronger than before, so I've been reinvesting into this old place's selection. Now they surprise me on occasion with a brew like this."

It might have seemed odd to many for a customer to hand out walking-around money to a brick-and-mortar store to improve the general quality, but it wasn't an odd hobby for a bon vivant with flush coffers. Investing in something local and leveraging one's name to move product traced its roots all the way back to the Age of Gods.

Laurentius wasn't necessarily investing in capital, but she *was* funneling her money to the barkeep so that he could add some variety to the Squid's stock at his discretion—a fitting method for such an eccentric.

"H-How can you keep this stuff down, man? The scent alone's putting me off," Siegfried said.

"Only the most booze-loving fanatics drink this straight," Erich said matter-of-factly. "I can only manage a couple of sips, to be honest. Mind if I have some water as a mixer?"

"Huh? Ah, right, I suppose it's a little strong for you mensch. Forgive me—at times I rate you as an even tougher ogre than me!"

Goldilocks shrugged his shoulders in bemusement at the ogre's deep belly laugh, while Sieg set his mug back down, happy he hadn't taken a sip yet.

Siegfried knew his own limits. When they had brought in Jonas Baltlinden, the revelers had given him drink upon drink, which had left him crouched over a bucket the next day, muttering insensate apologies that would go unanswered. Siegfried couldn't forget Kaya's exasperation—far more bitter than the tea she had given him to nurse his hangover.

"You see, I'm in a situation that is hitting me far harder than this drink. As my senior in the business, I wanted to borrow some of your wisdom, that I might mount a better defense."

"Is that right? Well, the only thing of worth I can give you is my blade."

"Yes, but you lead a clan of dozens. I wanted to ask what chain of events brought you to such a position."

Laurentius made a peculiar expression in reply to Goldilocks's unexpected remark before taking a huge gulp of gin straight from the bottle. She then took Siegfried's mug—rightly assuming that it was too much for him—and drained that too.

"Hmm... So you want to start a clan?"

"Not exactly. Becoming like Saint Fidelio, someone whose affairs go unmeddled in out of a collective understanding of the consequences, is hardly a task of days or weeks. I merely wish to improve my connections and information network; I do not wish for money or power."

Even though Erich had only taken one sip of alcohol, he was plainly far more drunk than anyone else in the room—drunk on the allure of adventure.

"I was hoping you could give some counsel based on your own experiences building a safe bedrock for yourself, given that you built one of Marsheim's most feared clans."

"*Counsel*, you say..."

Erich was far younger than her, a rookie adventurer who had snapped her out of her ennui—a man who still resolutely held that he *lost* that duel—and Laurentius felt a twinge of embarrassment at being asked for advice. She looked into the middle distance as she pondered the question.

"I'm not sure. It just kind of happened."

"C'mon, boss-lady, that's not true at all!" One of the old guard of Clan Laurentius, a gnoll who served as both adjutant and accountant, screamed in response. "Don't you remember my first day here?!"

"Of course I do! But...hmm, I *was* pretty drunk. I just kind of went with the flow, I guess?"

"You're breakin' my heart!"

If the genders were reversed, this would have been your typical comedic spat between an old couple—poor Kevin seemed quite shocked at this news. He fell to his knees upon the tavern floor, thick with grease stains and dust. As much as the liquor had improved, they'd never seen fit to hire a better custodian.

"S-So, boss-lady, do you not remember when I joined?" Ebbo, another old-timer in Kevin's vein, spoke up, pointing to his own face.

Laurentius evidently didn't want to answer. She averted her eyes from the quivering mensch, but her silence spoke volumes.

"H-Hold on, everyone! Take a deep breath! You're all my valued subordinates! I just can't remember how things ended up like *this*; I can't remember the moment we went from a mob to a clan!"

The ogress did her best to appease her loving subordinates, who broke out in tears one after another. The sight of a pack of square-jawed brawlers all but wailing into the titanic bosom of their leader left Sieg and Erich positively bumfuzzled.

"It's not like we had a party to celebrate our formation or anything. We just ended up here! To me it just seemed like the clan formed without me really doing anything!"

Erich took a sip of his grog. This "advice" seemed simultaneously vital and utterly useless. Put plainly, the clan had formed around Laurentius's own animal magnetism (or, in less charitable terms, they had simply flocked to the tallest landmark in sight)—that was all there was to it.

These men who served under her had seen in her exhaustion, her despair, and her flight into drink a mirror held up to their own lives. Adventuring had sapped their spirits and broken their ambitions, and their shared hunger for a win bound them inextricably. This alone had allowed them to hold together and avoid the iron fist of the law, even as the clan grew to staggering size.

"Hey, Erich... Should we slip out?"

"Nah, it would be ruder to run away from this situation. Though *really*, Sieg—do you have the guts to stand up and walk out while *this* is going on?"

Siegfried thought for a moment and realized that Erich was quite right.

Lost in the intense atmosphere of the tavern, the ogress's overwhelming beauty, and now this weird chaos, Siegfried had completely forgotten the question that had been playing on his lips—how the hell had Erich fallen in with this motley crew? It had proved such an awful time to ask that the question had fallen out of his brain.

[Tips] Unlike the more deliberate means by which one forms a company, the loose connection between adventurers can evolve and change, founding an institution before one realizes it.

When a situation got out of hand, one could always count on the nuclear option for dispersing many people's worries at once: throwing a party and letting everyone drink themselves under the table.

Such a scene had come to pass at the Inky Squid.

Seeing the patrons collapse where they stood, the barmaids had forsaken the day's pay and left the joint as it stood: mightily trashed. As for the owner, he'd just accepted the chaos as part of the cost of doing business and drunk himself into a pleasant repose.

Siegfried and I remained awake—we had lain low in a corner to stay out of the cross fire—as well as Miss Laurentius herself.

"*Hic*..."

Even she had her limits. Keeping pace with her whole clan as they drowned their sorrows had tested them. She sat deep in her chair, three sheets to the wind, her face flushing into a deeper and fresher shade of blue.

"Ugh... What's the time?"

"It's been a little while since the dusk bell rang."

"Oh, is that right? We've been drinking...for almost half the day."

To be honest, I was somewhat relieved when we first arrived. At a glance, she looked markedly less like shit—brighter-eyed, better complected—most likely

because she'd started going a fair bit lighter on the sauce of late. In other words, it was clear she'd returned to the life of a healthy warrior.

Her once unruly hair had been taken care of—she had asked me to cut it once after it wasn't going how she wanted it to. Her clothes, on the other hand, were the same as ever: modest things that didn't quite fit properly. Some vestiges of her previous state remained, but in general she was far more polished than before.

The party had closed out with some nonverbal communication to make amends between her and her underlings—scuffles, brawls, the sort of stuff that these muscleheads seemed to like—which, combined with her brief indulgence in the bottle, had put her in quite the state.

"I'm sorry... I never ended up giving you any decent advice."

"Not at all. I've learned a lot."

I wasn't being polite—this experience had been enlightening in its own way. I had found out that beauty and martial might could make folks bend the knee without actually making a coherent effort to build connections. Even Miss Laurentius's world-weariness could be a draw in and of itself. It likely helped that the adventuring community had no shortage of sad sacks with more grit than brains.

This was hugely useful intel. In this life and the one before, I'd been drawn to formal structure, social norms, authority, and institutional discipline. I had done the usual job-hunting grind that Japanese university graduates did and landed a place at a company whose name I'd long since forgotten; here, I had been invited by Lady Agrippina to work for her. In either life, I had never participated in a group this *organic*—hell, I'd scarcely known something of the kind existed! Even when it came to my former hobby, I had worked to create that space for us by going out to rent a room in an apartment so that me and my friends had a place to meet and play. There was variation in who chose to show up, as people often dropped out eventually, but they chose to join of their own accord and all happily contributed to keep the bills paid for the common space that we'd actively built together. And then there were Siegfried and Kaya. I had recruited them—all but press-ganged them into my circle of friends, really.

Seeing Clan Laurentius with the understanding that it had simply fallen into place was eye-opening. Adventurers, living moment to moment as they did, had a way of swaying wildly between pursuing their dreams and their practical needs. You hardly needed mind games or cheap tricks to pull a group together—you just needed to find *something* that you could all chase after, a path to walk as one.

"I haven't felt like this in some time...how odd, to fight to keep my eyes open after one night's revels... *Hic*..."

Miss Laurentius pushed her hair from her face and let out a self-effacing chuckle. Her hand reached out for the bottle, but after a moment of hesitation she picked up the water jug instead.

"I drank to rid myself of my *hunger*. I thought...if I dulled my senses with...*hic*...liquor, I could forget my lust for battle."

After chugging half the pitcher, she tipped the rest over her head. Confronted again with her uniquely languid beauty, I could see why her fan club of drunken rogues were so drawn to her. Seeing someone who was so incredibly out of your league in terms of strength but also facing a complete disillusionment with the world made you want to admire and support them. *Yep, this is totally the reason why penniless dirtbag rock stars always have fans.*

"The burning feeling from pushing your body to the limit far outclasses the way that liquor burns...but however faint the imitation, it let me delude myself awhile. Then I found myself at the bottom of the barrel...lazy and hopeless."

The ogre warrior flicked the rivulets of water from her brow, although the haze of alcohol couldn't be so easily swept away, and stood up. Despite the waver in her speech, interrupted at times by hiccups, her posture showed no trace of weakness. I was stunned at how much could change in such a short period of time. If I took her on again with my no-magic handicap, I was sure I would lose. I couldn't help but think of Miss Lauren—just how strong must she have been to make *this* terrifying specimen of a warrior flee from her? A shiver ran through me again at this thought.

"But it's no good... If I remember that fire...the inferno that awaits me at my absolute limit...I feel a craving for blood...and death."

Her thoughts dulled by booze, her ogreish appetites started to show through. Just as we mensch were unable to bear more literal hunger and thirst, so too did ogres crave the thrill of a real scrap. It wasn't the same kind of abstract kick that other races might find in violence—joy at having attained superiority over others or the approval of the survivors. An ogre's lust for battle drove them more deeply than their compulsions to pursue food, sex, or sleep. The higher they climbed, the harder the hunger was to endure—or to satisfy.

"Yes...it's coming back to me. I see it clearer now... Victory was never my aim...only the fight."

For regular folk, a battle was something to get through to reach either victory or death, but for ogres, these were simply bonuses that were tacked on at the end. The true draw was the emotional and physical toll of the thing; if one should prefer death or victory, it was only in the way one might prefer spirits to ale.

"All I want...is to unleash everything I have...and be cut down in battle once I am sated. Heh... I was always the black sheep of my tribe."

Miss Laurentius moved with bored, smooth strides and picked up the massive twin swords lying by her chair without difficulty. She hitched them to her leather belt and gave another toothy grin.

"Fire... I need fire. Without it I cannot live. The blazing fire that comes of others pushing you ever forward. I think that...is the essence of a band like ours."

At this, things seemed to fall into place.

The world was full of people that we could give value to by connecting with them. Such folk had built nations. Liu Bang, Emperor Gaozu of Han, differed from Miss Laurentius in many ways, but the way they had amassed followers had been the same. They had the strength to draw people in and make them want to live and die alongside them.

It was easy to say, but seemed impossible to replicate. Such charisma couldn't be conjured on command—it was something you were born with.

"But you, Erich...you lit the fire beneath me. You have...talent."

The ogress dragged her alcohol-dulled body toward the staircase. Unfortunately, she didn't have the energy left to take care of her clan in their state.

"Hunger and fire. People will move if they are reminded of what these things mean to them. Heh...*hic.*"

The wooden staircase groaned under her weight, an echo of the howling emptiness that Miss Laurentius held in her own heart.

"Be proud. My blade is yours...if need be. I will always be at the ready to protect your own skills from ever being stripped away. Don't forget...that you're the one who did this to me."

With a hoarse chuckle, Miss Laurentius disappeared out of sight as she trod the path back to her room.

"Phew..."

Siegfried and I let out massive sighs as we let go of the tension we had been holding. We had suffocated under Miss Laurentius's incredible presence for far too long—something that a regular drunkard could never imitate. Our brains knew this wasn't battle, but our senses were on high alert. It couldn't have been good for our hearts, that was for sure.

"Let's go home..."

"Yeah, you said it..."

I had introduced my friend to a powerful clan and received some advice. It had been a useful day, but good gods, were we exhausted. We hadn't even drunk that much; it was the pressure of the room that had worn us down.

Charm, huh? The power to draw people to you...

It wasn't an unfamiliar concept. When I was sick of two-bit thugs getting in the way of my adventures, I had boosted my Negotiation skills. When I had been perusing my skill tree for something that would allow me to lay down some roots, I had noticed quite the expensive trait: Absolute Charisma.

This was a trait that founders of nations or legendary heroes were permitted, so even with all the free experience I was getting from Limelit, it was still quite

the pricey investment. I had been putting a lot of focus on skills and traits that would boost my direct fighting power—who knew when a Divine-level beast might ambush us—but it seemed like the time to make a decision had finally come.

Fortunately our gamut of battles had given me some direct experience, *and* I had gotten some bonus Limelit experience from the whole affair too. After all, our quest hadn't just been to curry our sympathy for the situation in Marsheim—we had been little canaries heading down into the mines, that we might give our own appraisal of the situation. As such, our return had sent mouths flapping.

And yet...it still wasn't quite enough to bag me Absolute Charisma.

It wasn't all too surprising. This one little trait could leave you set for life. It was incredible, but it took some finessing in terms of build and usage if you were to use it to make some drastic changes to your life.

It cost about as much as five other cheaper traits—the boons it gave were in exchange for reduced firepower. It demanded absolute caution. Yet when I considered its practical applications, it seemed worth the steep price. I had bought the cheaper version of Absolute Charisma, so the rules of the world seemed to indicate that I had passed enough checks for a nice discount, but it would take all of my savings and then some in one go.

I was jealous of Siegfried's spend-happy bravery right now.

"I was thinking we should make another house call the day after tomorrow."

"You serious? Man, I don't wanna do today again."

"Yeah... We're gonna get our hands a little dirty with this next trip, so I'll need to prep you before we go. No sense wading into all that drug business half-cocked."

"Drugs?! So you *admit* that you've been dealin' with wastoids! No wonder all the rookies wanna keep their distance from you!"

"What?! Hold it, Sieg, people think that about me?! All I've been doing is trying to live an upright adventuring life!"

Siegfried and I ribbed each other as we walked through the cool night, our hearts full of newly acquired insights.

[Tips] It is said that humans' three desires are food, sex, and sleep. However, ogres' hunger for battle trumps all three of these. Researchers have noted that their desire for battle perhaps even exceeds vampires' cravings for blood.

After two days of puzzling over the complexities it took to make a clan, I decided it was time to meet up with my trump card, however dirty it made me feel.

"My... You seem in good health. Your arms and legs...still attached to your body... How grand."

Yes, I had called in with the head of the Baldur Clan, Nanna Baldur Snorrison.

"It was just as you had warned. We pushed onward and managed to arrive safely back despite it."

"It was quite the foul-smelling request. I was wondering why...some customers at the Association were so upset."

Today as ever, the emaciated (but *inexplicably* curvaceous—I tried not to contemplate what sort of alchemical horror she was knocking back to sustain her figure) College dropout was smoking on a potent brew. I could tell one puff would probably send me crashing straight to the floor.

I had given up on bringing Siegfried with me, mostly because Kaya wouldn't sign off on it. My Insulating Barrier could protect us from the various smokes and fumes there, but Kaya knew most out of all of us the dangers posed by Nanna's work, and so had decided she couldn't in her right mind allow her partner to set foot somewhere so dangerous. She'd said that she wasn't yet skilled enough to create antidotes to poisons of the brain. An ounce of prevention would be worth a pound of cure. And so here I was, alone.

Margit was taking a day off. We had, ahem, had a little bit more fun last night, and I had left her asleep. She had been muttering something about paying me

back for last time, so I imagined there was something about our first time together that had annoyed her. Intimacy is sometimes heightened when we have secret desires and thoughts about our partner, so I decided not to pry.

"So? What brings you to me today?"

Nanna smirked at me as she touched the water pipe to her lips. I took a deep puff of my own pipe before getting into the matter.

"Circumstances of late have me interested in how best to go about my business without the movers and shakers of the world getting their hooks in me. You seemed like you might have wisdom to share."

Nanna's eyes—the bags under them set so deep that it almost looked like she was wearing makeup—widened in surprise at my remark. Why did I find her so *cute* in that moment? Had my first roll in the hay thrown my whole body out of whack? *Gods, I need to keep a lid on these runaway thoughts. I do* not *want to be one of those men who meets a swift end because they can't keep it in their pants.*

"Advice, you say... In other words...you don't want to be worked into the ground...doing political dirty work?"

"In short, yes."

"I see... A difficult conundrum."

Nanna had told me right at the start that our adventure in the ichor maze had been handed down to us through a mediator employed by a small-time noble. She had known that Viscount Frombach, in charge of our destination of Zeufar canton, would have been in Berylin on social business. In other words, it was highly likely that political powers had some sway in my current problem. Naturally, I thought the person who had seen this problem from a mile away would have some unique insight into how to avoid it.

Nanna was silent for a while, then blew out a puff of smoke. "The simplest solution," she replied, "is to make a bond with a generous client or two...that no one would want to get rid of."

The Baldur Clan had remained in play this long, despite the deeply illegal nature of their stock-in-trade, entirely because merchants of the black, gray,

and white markets alike depended on them. Marsheim's drug culture was old and strong; so long as the junk in circulation didn't threaten the order of things, nobody batted an eye.

Whatever the poison, so long as your world needed a little escaping from, there would always be demand for intoxicants. Junk was hardly any different from booze in that regard. Considering the long history of alcohol on Earth, it was no surprise to see just how poorly prohibition in America had gone. Even more compromise was needed when it came to an era without firm rule of law, in a world even more chaotic than the one I'd come from. The Baldur Clan was Marsheim's answer to these conditions. Under the circumstances, Nanna's advice was quite fitting.

"Should I...introduce you to a mediator...who deals in many squeaky-clean jobs? They're favorable with the Empire...and have links with local lords who have had a change of heart...as well as other clients from outside Marsheim. They seem...rather distant from all this scheming."

Ahh, yeah, a mediator. That was an option.

It was difficult to know the ins and outs of a request before actually taking it on. An incredible amount of time and resources were needed to vet not just a prospective gig, but the client themselves, especially before you'd made a commitment. It was an investment, and like any investment, it would demand that belts be tightened elsewhere in one's budget. That said, if I could build a relationship of mutual trust with a client, I could rise in their estimation and stick to straight-and-narrow work.

Nanna was well aware that I could ruin her life with one simple letter; I surmised that she wouldn't try and throw me under the bus now. After all, my ace in the hole wasn't your regular old blackmail. I had all the power to let her former professor know where she was, and even I couldn't say whether that horrific geist would cry or absolutely lose her mind if she knew the kind of filth Nanna was up to here. I could summon the pervert supreme in a single turn to completely obliterate Nanna. She could never have reached the heights of power she had if she were dumb enough to try to play me, knowing the position I had her in.

“Even in Ende Erde...they can be found: people with time on their hands...and *philosophical* thoughts about nobles in their heads.”

There were three types of nobles out here in the Empire’s western periphery. The first were those who directly served Margrave Marsheim. The second were the old bastions of power, the local lords. The third were dispatched from the government. Even though Margrave Marsheim had roots in quite the established bloodline and had a legion of his nobles and the local big shots who had joined the Imperial cause, he still didn’t have enough people to establish a hegemony here in Marsheim. To fill this void, nobles had been dispatched from neighboring areas. Many viewed the move to this underdeveloped and lawless land as a demotion—old Tokugawa probably felt the same way when he was forced to leave his home of Mikawa—but there were those who were happy to develop the land for the glory of the Empire, few though they might have been.

Responding to their enthusiasm, some of those in power had decided that they too would lend their aid in helping to make Marsheim safer for the people who lived there. There were a few mediators who worked with people like this, and Nanna promised that she would write me a letter of recommendation.

“Remember? You went on a medicine run...to help prepare for winter? I have a mediator...who works under kind nobles...like that one.”

That was a relief to hear. Of course, I wanted to do my own little bit of digging, but at this rate I would be able to make some connections that would allow me to avoid any unwanted suspicion.

Naturally, this introduction came with a price tag: namely, my continued silence. Nanna’s kindness came from the fear that I had the power to rat on her to Lady Leizniz with a snap of my fingers.

My pieces were all in place. Instead of blackmailing those in power and securing jobs by force to keep myself out of trouble, I could get in their good books by finding a good client who had political sway. Two birds, one stone.

“In return, a little generosity wouldn’t go amiss... I can give you prices...that are twenty to thirty percent below going rates... I won’t allow late payments though...”

“I don’t mind. All I want is to be able to enjoy my adventures without

worries.”

I didn’t care that she looked at me as if I was this side of crazy. I just loved adventuring that much. Fame? Money? Connections? These were all necessary elements, yes, but they were not my end goal.

“And...may I make...a little request?”

“What is it?”

Perhaps Nanna had realized something after seeing me look so satisfied with myself. After a few moments of silence, Nanna drew something out and laid her hand on the table—as usual, a meal had been prepared for host and guest, but it sat there untouched and getting cold.

“What’s this?”

“A little something...that’s been in circulation...since the start of the year.”

I couldn’t help but furrow my brow. Drug problems? Again? I wasn’t stupid—I knew this was an inseparable element of human history in my old world and any other, but I felt wary of her way of wedding old-school pharmacology to *actual magic*. Nanna’s Sweet Dreams potion already had this town by the throat; what was she doing handing me the *sequel?*

I pushed down my frustrations. What I found inside surprised me. It was a pill. I had hardly ever seen a circular pill since coming to this world. Rhinian medicine usually came powdered, in infusions, or as little pellets.

The small black pill before me was given shape with starch or something, and cut into a little cylinder. It looked like candy. This was bleeding-edge ingestible medicine—even the College hadn’t fully adopted this kind of delivery mechanism yet.

I couldn’t sense any mana from it. I couldn’t tell whether magic had been used in its manufacture, but I could tell that when ingested, its effects were purely chemical.

“And what is this?”

“It causes ecstatic hallucinations, intoxication, mild dyschronometria, and changes in personality... It’s quite stimulating to the nervous system.”

Huh... That's ringing a couple bells...

"It's simple to ingest. Simply allow it to...melt on the tongue...and it'll be taken in with saliva. Its effects...last about half a day."

That's it! It's LSD!

LSD was a psychedelic drug—a powerful hallucinogen derived from ergot alkaloids. On Earth, naturally occurring psychedelics like the fly agaric mushroom had left a huge footprint on human history, helping fuel religious ceremonies and mystical experiences the world over. If I remembered correctly, folks figured out how to synthesize psychedelics in lab conditions in the latter half of the twentieth century; from there, they'd entered public use by private citizens and governments alike, and in time came to be treated as a social problem.

This is way *too early for any world to develop LSD! And in such a compact form! This is* potent *stuff! I mean, maybe it isn't a hundred-percent the same as LSD, but it's close enough!*

"Well, it's a poor product, really... I thought it might come in handy, sharing a little of the burden of what goes on in my own mind...but it's no real help..."

She's already had a taste, huh... Jeez... Is there nothing *this woman won't test on herself, just to see if it'll fit into her little junkie empire? She's something else...*

"It's just a stupid drug... It doesn't reach the soul...or the true depths of the mind. They're calling it Elefsina's Eye... Ridiculous name, if you ask me... It's just a worthless hallucinogen," Nanna spat, sounding uncharacteristically bitter. The pill caught fire right there in her palm. It seemed like she'd gotten her hopes up about it taking the edge off of the living nightmare locked inside that skull of hers.

"I don't know who made this...but they should be ashamed. It's worthless. An eyesore... The trip...does nothing...to strip bare...this world's illusions."

Life must have been a nightmare for an epistemologist with no higher ordering principle to fall back on. All that remained in the fields of a brain tilled by a plow of logic and deductive reasoning was a barren waste. Maybe if she'd

had a little Descartes to chew on, she'd have turned out a bit less twisted.

"It's a useless defect...lots of bells and whistles, lots of side effects, no substance... All the same...it's habit-forming...and cheap."

"How cheap?"

"Fifteen assarii for a pill... A generous price, indeed."

Only fifteen?! That was pocket change—enough for a few days' cheap eats! Hardly an appropriate price for something this strong. My memories were hazy, but I could swear that LSD used to set you back a few thousand yen at least. And considering the cost of manufacture, the price here didn't make any business sense.

"So are they making a loss on them?"

"Oh, it's a tried-and-tested method. You sell the first batch cheap...and crank up the prices once your user base gets hooked. You can drive out competitors...and control the market."

Now that is evil. I was naive to have forgotten that such methods were viable. As someone who'd always tried to live in a just and fair way, whose only experience with drugs had been purely through the medium of fiction, this was a method that would never have come to me naturally. Still, I could have sworn I'd seen something like that come up in a novel I'd read once. All the same, this was *not* the kind of crap I wanted pulled in my medieval-slash-early-modern mishmash fantasy world, dammit!

"It seems that there are already some nobles and guards sniffing around the stuff...and are slowly being led into the trap. We're doing our best to...eliminate this competition, but..."

"You need some more hands to rough up their labs?"

"It's a relief that you catch on so quickly."

The Baldur Clan had outsourced their bodyguard work to me so consistently because they weren't geared toward close combat. The clan's precious mages—excluding Uzu, who was on courier duty—were busy guarding their own workshops and turf, meaning that sending even one of them to do grunt work

would amount to a loss in their forces.

They were working on a medical solution to their muscle problem, but so far they were still a long way out from any sort of super soldier serum. Putting the likes of Mister Fidelio to one side for a second, the Baldur Clan would no doubt be useless against the Heilbronn Familie, with whom they had strained relations, to say the least. Against their burly audhumbla boss or Manfred the zentaur (who'd made a name for himself splitting the tongues of would be shit-talkers), Nanna's underlings would be like a rickety door rattling in the wind. Their mass-produced fighters would hold up against your average Joe in the street, but anyone with some real skill could deliver them a firm ass-beating.

"We're still doing our research...and haven't yet turned up many leads...but I will be sure to call on you."

Nanna's choices were limited when it came to important jobs like protecting her HQ, so I was to be called in when it came time to take on the big guns. It made sense; Nanna's magical skill set was geared more toward indoor fighting, as opposed to open-air combat or sudden raids. She could transform her entire manor into a killzone for any intruder by simply releasing magical clouds of noxious fumes, letting the maddened fools pick each other off in a wild rampage. Her skills were very much geared toward being the one raided, not the other way around.

Fine, why not? I'd developed an attachment to this town, for better or worse. I would sooner turn a blind eye to the questionable ethics of this woman than sit on my hands and let a pit of squalor grow many times worse.

It would be a win-win situation for both of us. Which is not to say that I couldn't tell who was getting the bigger slice of the pie.

[Tips] Descartes pondered on the nature of human consciousness, believing that it does not simply emerge from one's sensory experience, but that the thinking, immaterial mind is a *connected yet distinct thing* from the unthinking, material body. However, such philosophical discussions on consciousness do not come about so easily in a world where even the gods are finite.

“It’s a matter of morality, young Erich.”

A resounding smack echoed in the fresh, bright morning air. Huge bedsheets hung in the Snoozing Kitten’s inner garden under the early spring sun, carefully placed so as not to touch the dirt below. Saint Fidelio was doing his best to get the creases out of the laundry as he gave Goldilocks a little lecture.

“*They who indulge in vice shall flee and scatter. They who hold up their morals shall stand tall*.”

“That’s from...*The Book of Praises*, Proverbs, Chapter, uh...Three? No, Two?”

Goldilocks was busily stamping on a bucket filled with water, soap, and laundry, but that was not the source of his wavering grasp on the Sun God’s scripture. It had just been a while since he had sat down with the texts.

“Chapter Two, Verse Three. It goes on: *Moral ends and moral means are harmonious; they contribute to a peace everlasting*.”

“I shouldn’t expect any less from a man of the cloth.”

“Not at all. I sermonize passably, but no more than that. I only seek to follow the teachings of my God in all I do. I’m hardly missionary material.”

While Erich had been out on an adventure, so too had the saint. He had rolled up his sleeves so as not to get them wet, and his muscular forearms—each broader than your average mensch child’s torso—were crisscrossed with welts that seemed more from the realm of a clumsy chef than an adventurer. Two large circular wounds on his left palm, still raw to look at, indicated to Erich that his senior had perhaps fought with some kind of beast of prey—a wound most likely sustained while protecting one of his party members.

Among his other bruises and cuts, this was a hideous wound that would have left the average person without an arm. But this devout follower of the Sun God paid it less concern than his current task of bestowing his bedding with his master’s blessings. These battle scars served as a fine lesson in and of themselves for this earnest youngster, so he didn’t mind showing off such fresh wounds only a day after his return.

“In the Proverbs is another passage: *One’s virtue should be as our Sun in the heavens—though passing clouds may dim its glow, never should it go out*.”

When this young adventurer had come to him asking what best to do in order to escape from the plotting of statesmen and the world of politics, the saint had plainly and cheerfully answered him: one must earnestly show one’s morals.

Taken to its logical conclusion, the heart of the axiom was to pare away all one’s earthly disputes with supreme violence, and this underlying implication caused Goldilocks to pull a wry smile. The words were heavy with the weight of personal experience.

When Saint Fidelio had enacted revenge against the crooks from the evil clan who had wanted to control him, he’d used his brute strength to crush any who’d sullied their hands in unforgivable misdeeds. There was no trace of exaggeration in the story of Fidelio’s night of righteous ruin—the armor-clad battle monk of the Sun God had crushed all evil in his path.

Despite the administrative ruling that combat between adventurers was not permitted, he had broken these rules, come in person to throw adequate compensation at their keepers’ feet—this was not a metaphor, Fidelio had quite literally flung his payment with enough force to leave a small crater at the castle gate—and gone on his way.

The message was clear: *You can’t complain about this, can you?* By proving his point with his might alone, his opponent could only sit in silence.

Since then, everyone had taken a step away from Saint Fidelio, regarding him as the one man most not to be meddled with.

“The most important thing is defining those morals for yourself and sticking to them. Ever since I was born into this world, there is only one thing that I am ashamed of.”

Fidelio’s arms, far broader and more powerful than the average lancer’s, were entirely busy with handling the laundry immaculately. If any were to look upon this scene, they would see nothing more than a youngish innkeeper who cared about his livelihood.

“Naive as I was, I didn’t kill all of those bastards before they hurt Shymar.”

And yet appearances were deceiving. Although his gentle smile was like a warm sunbeam, the sight of sheets hanging in the breeze positively pastoral, the details of his story were anything but.

The sun drove away the cold and gave life to crops. However, it could also parch the soil and mortify flesh. The Father God's follower was no less dyadic.

"When I was younger I used to believe that human nature was fundamentally good. I thought that if I were simply strong enough, then I could calm even the most fevered mind, and reason would follow. I was quite the fool in those days."

"And so you cut down a hundred people?"

"Oh, enough of that. Personally, I struck down around thirty. The gross body count was higher, but that was only because my allies had my back. It wasn't a hundred, I'm certain—maybe only eighty or so?"

While the saint let out a dry laugh and a comment that the Catchpenny Scribbler had penned quite the troublesome exaggeration, Goldilocks could only stand slack-jawed.

"One of the proverbs of the God of Trials hadn't yet sunk in back then, I suppose. *To be free and just, learn how to cut; virtue grows where a blade is there to shelter it.*"

"Um, that's from the *Art of War*'s...preface?"

"Bingo. Verse Two."

Happy that this young adventurer had been educating himself in divine scripture, Fidelio took the washed sheet from Goldilocks and began to rid it of excess water and creases. Even though the Sun God had less vivacity on this early spring day, with enough moisture shaken off, they would dry by noon.

"All I can really say is to be like this laundry. Keep your distance from that which would seek to dirty you."

Fidelio's delicate handling of the laundry, not allowing even a corner to reach the dirt of the garden, was emblematic of the way he lived his life. Avoid evil, but be ready to strike it down—through putting actions to words, make your

name known in the world.

This way in which Fidelio had created a rift between him and the troubles of the world at large was incredibly difficult, but the younger adventurer aspired to it regardless. After all, Erich had taken a similar route when a certain clan had tried to drag him into their schemes. The problem was that this wasn't so simple when the one causing trouble was the political administration itself—only true monsters with positively demonic auras could avoid their prying.

"I still take on jobs if it's for the people. I have connections whose noses are honed to sniff out reliable information."

Survive and keep your means pure and exacting—these were the adventurer's ABC's.

"Don't be too fussy," Fidelio went on. "Find your morals and stick to them until your dying day. Although I suppose that results in profit being pushed to the back burner. It's a difficult line to walk. Reliable information costs money, so that naturally eats into your margins."

"That doesn't bother me too much. I don't want to be forced into a position where I want to quit being an adventurer all for the sake of a few silver coins."

Money was useful, yes, but Goldilocks wasn't obsessed with the stuff. What was important was the things that money gave you—tools, experience, efficiency. This belief that money was a means to an end had been finely honed ever since his previous life.

Instead of sleeping in the finest bed, drinking the fanciest wine, he would rather put his earnings toward Alert Potions or mana stones to up his MP. When, at the table, he had become a near-legendary adventurer, he had chosen to lie down in a bed of hay beside the horses. He had dined on flavorless gruel for ages to leave room in the budget for the right magic weapon.

What he yearned for, with his equipment that could all be sold for enough gold to make him a veritable noble, was a journey into the unknown and battles with ever greater foes.

Each adventurer had their own dreams, but there was no rookie who would meet their end with their riches still in their pockets.

All adventurers knew that money would come after a successful quest. There were some players who were obsessed with optimizing their monetary gains, but this was nothing compared to what the efforts from the grind gave you.

“Very good. There are many rookies who mistake the wood for the trees and do things they later regret, all for the sake of a quick few silver pieces.”

For Erich, who had swung his blade on dark nights on the orders of his former master, the older adventurer seemed almost blinding.

“Ah, I was going to ask,” Fidelio said. “By all appearances you’ve formed a party, but you don’t seem to have many connections with other lower-level adventurers.”

“Huh? Oh, yes, I suppose you’re right.”

Fidelio’s sudden change in topic took Erich by surprise. Fidelio wondered if the younger adventurer—arguably the saint’s disciple—realized it was his oblique way of saying that Erich didn’t have many friends.

“Well, then I would advise you that you’ve not given enough weight to your lateral connections. I wouldn’t sniff at making a little network of your peers. It can prove to be a useful source of information in its own way.”

Erich’s connections were horribly skewed. This had been the case ever since he’d worked in Berylin. During the years he spent in the Capital of Vanity, he had only managed to make two friends his own age—one of them, admittedly, was actually a vampire of forty summers, but developmentally speaking she was just as much a teen. His current network of relations could be counted on one hand—and one of these had gone from simple friend to something more.

Erich had no comeback to being told flat out that he had almost no friends.

His early days in Marsheim had led him to set up shop in the Snoozing Kitten, which had been the first factor to distance him from his peers. He’d spent these early days only with Margit, and a few jobs had led him to becoming fast friends with Siegfried and Kaya. Perhaps more than anything, however, it was the speed at which he’d amassed victories and notoriety that had led to his social solitude.

First he had clashed with the major clans. Then he had toppled Jonas

Baltlinden—an almighty feat on its own. There was a gulf now between Erich and his peers that the camaraderie of youth or a shared calling could not bridge.

There was something else that the man in question had totally forgotten—he had obtained various traits, such as Oozing Gravitas, when the Exilrat had singled him out, which only made it even harder for people to approach him. Passive traits were useful, but they also invited their own unique problems. Just as a tiger stands out among cats, Erich's might and fame had distanced him from his peers. A simple glance told them he was *different,* and this made forging friendships uniquely difficult.

"A social circle, huh..."

"Exactly. I can see why you stay here—it's the best place in all of Marsheim. The food's great and the owner is a real beauty! But I think it might be time to broaden your worldview."

As Fidelio returned to bragging about his darling wife, he gave Goldilocks an encouraging pat on the back.

Of course, he refrained from telling his younger fellow something he deemed unimportant. In truth, it was Hansel, not Fidelio, who was saddled with dealing with their party's social and information network...

[Tips] Fame isn't all good. It leaves an uncontrollable first impression that might be difficult to alter.

Her pale back in the moonlight was a breathtaking sight, bringing to mind the desert at night. Her girlish figure was at odds with the defined muscle that rippled underneath her skin. The place where those back muscles, honed under a lifetime of archery, met her spider's carapace captivated me.

I knew just how wonderful it would be to stroke that soft back, but I held myself in check—I didn't want to tease her any more than I already had. Her beautiful back, which had never seen danger—aside from her mother—was more delicate and responsive than the lap harp it reminded me of. I knew that a simple touch was more than enough to make her sing, but I knew if I let my

desires take over she wouldn't speak to me tomorrow morning. She had already thrown a pillow at me once tonight in utter exhaustion—not with any force, though.

Man, it's tough having a young body again. I had made a few...foolish purchases, and once a fire had been lit under me, I found it difficult to keep it contained. Details of this side of life from my previous teenage years were a bit hazy now, but this time around I had curbed any sexual desires that wouldn't go anywhere with sword practice, so I had kind of lost sense of what was *normal* during these troublesome years.

What I did know was that eight times in one night was pushing it a little.

Margit's responses had been too alluring, and I had egged her on by teasing her for coming at me like she was challenging me, which had led to a bit of fun between the sheets.

The early spring nights were still cold, even more so for arachne and their lower base temperature. I had wrapped up my partner in blankets before the warmth from our lovemaking had faded away.

I sat up and cast Clean on myself and the bed before leaning out the window and taking a deep drag on my pipe. I let out a billow of smoke and watched it dissipate into the night sky, blurring into the moonlight.

My hair, which had at some point come undone from its bun, looked almost silver. I took care of it as ever, and the glow from the Night Goddess was gentle but...heavy.

"Aww, you've finally dirtied yourself."

The moonlight had more prosaic reasons to weigh on me than some ripple in the laws of physics.

"You should stop sitting on people's heads." Ursula had materialized right on top of me. I went on, "And what do you mean by that?"

"Purity is valued by some more than you may think. All children are born pure into this world, after all."

"You sure do love your extremes..."

Ursula was swinging her legs in the corner of my vision; I could feel her heels tickling my eyelashes with each kick. I knew by now that they would never actually hit me, but it was quite the shock when it first happened. All the same, knowing that my eyeballs could be splattered at any moment with each swing was already exhausting my patience.

"Hmm, well, nothing about you has changed, so I'll let you off the hook," Ursula said.

"Yeah, yeah, thanks, I guess."

"There's less competition for you now, though."

I had noticed that since I had turned fifteen, I had started to receive less teasing from my two alfar companions, and they had started to appear before me even less since Margit and I had made our promise together.

I imagined that both purity and age were important to alfar. I had gotten pretty sick and tired of their constant teasing and games growing up, so why did I feel this twinge of sadness now that it had stopped?

"All the same," Ursula went on, "the human world is quite the headache."

"Why do you make it seem so irrelevant to you?"

"Because it is. You mortals are so preoccupied with such trivial matters."

I felt the svartalf shift above me before she used my forehead as a kickboard to propel herself into the air. Her wings caught the moonlight like an *Actias aliena* moth's as her body—her deep amber skin, crimson eyes, and white hair—carved an elegant arc in the air.

"But no matter. The night sky is beautiful; the darkness, warm and inviting."

The sight of an alf dancing in the spring night sky was mystical and enrapturing. It was as if the night itself had taken the form of a girl to enchant me.

"Hey! The wind at night is super great and awesome."

In a moment, one arc of light had become two. Green intermingled with the pale blue light as a relaxed voice joined the mix.

“You’re here too, Lottie?”

“Well, yeah. You look like you ate a bug!”

“And you left us all alone for a whole winter,” Ursula added.

The alfar were free beings unbound by the shackles of ordinary life. The essence of their lives existed far above those of mortals, on a conceptual plane—natural phenomena given personality, doing as they pleased.

Folk led about by the base drives bound strictly to this world could never fully grasp the alfar’s ways. If you did, then you would end up spirited away, as they did with children.

“It wasn’t my fault. I was in my own share of trouble—if I could’ve asked for help, I would have. It all just came ’round on the wrong day...or under the wrong moon.”

If I could have borrowed the pair’s strength, we could have cleared that sprawling labyrinth in, maybe not a day, but three, perhaps.

“That’s happening all the time recently! Is someone playing tricks, I wonder? If you’re in trouble, then that’s the perfect time to help you or show you the joy of our alfar tricks,” Ursula said.

“Those kiddies with spinning wheels! They’re no good at all,” Lottie chimed in.

“Yeah, those lot who love messing with Erich seem to be hiding recently... Maybe they’re planning something.”

Spinning wheels? That’s not an auspicious motif... If I remembered correctly, among the decaying gods of the Southern Sea, there was a divine being who presided over fate or destiny and bore a spinning wheel...

It wasn’t rare for the gods’ authority to impinge on the alfar—the two before me were perfect examples—and I felt some sense of fate at work.

I had no faith in my own luck, but the two alfar completely ignored these concerns. Their midair dance grew more intense. They carved a circle of light in the air, and as I watched I felt a strange emotion tickle the corners of my eyes. Was this nostalgia? Homesickness? However one might qualify the longing, it was for something I was certain I didn’t even know.

I supposed it wasn’t all too strange. Back in my old world, I had felt a sense of longing toward things I had never known—dial TVs, ramune bottles where the lid was one with the bottle, untended countryside paths, old sweet shops with candies no one ate anymore. This feeling was much the same.

They had turned toward me with their hands outstretched—inviting, caring. *Take our hands, let’s draw circles together...*

I had a strange conviction that if I took their hand now, I would be able to fly—I wouldn't plummet down to the ground; I would be able to dance in the open air with them.

"Isn't the world of humans so tiring? Dance with us."

"Yeah, I bet you're sleepy-weepy! What's the point if you're tired?"

My elbows leaning on the window frame quivered slightly—my body was unconsciously reacting to their invitation.

I was sure it would be wonderful.

I was sure it would be beautiful.

I was sure it would be a time with no worries or cares.

But I had no plans to do so. Right now, I felt no desire to hand in my character sheet and say it was a good run. I had my fair share of troubles and worries, but they were part and parcel of an adventurer's life.

The wisps of smoke from my pipe reached out to their hands.

In the next moment, I heard the snickering of young girls and boys and the circle they had created vanished.

I supposed that the pure alfar that dwelled beyond it didn't take too well to the herbal fumes, designed to soothe an old and weary soul.

They were a far purer and more innocent class of being than children, after all.

"Ah, what a shame," Ursula said.

"Aww, Her Queenieness said this would be super effective against tired people."

I knew it. I couldn't slip up with these two, even now. I hadn't had to engage with any alfar tricks recently, so I had thought that all the alfar aside from these two were done with me. I hadn't imagined so many of their kind would still fawn over me like this.

"I'd be happy to dance with you, if it's on solid ground," I said.

“Eh, I knew you wouldn’t bite.”

“Huuuh? You said we should do this, Ursula!”

“Silence is golden, Lottie...”

I smiled a mature smile as I watched them chase each other. I didn’t have plans for excitement in the near future, but I would ask them for help if I needed it.

Just how long would the protective facade I and my former master had devised last?

[Tips] The longer people live, the more they are prone to nostalgia for that which they have lost along the way. The alfar can only be seen during one’s youth, so it could be said that they are nostalgia given flesh.

Spring of the Sixteenth Year

Troupe Play

Just as human civilizations attained greater productive power through a finer-grained and more rigid division of labor, a party of adventurers can grow stronger through finding a niche that they are uniquely suited to. However, an adventurer only has one body. Should a player find themselves unable to participate in one scene due to priorities elsewhere, they may take the reins of an affiliated NPC to smooth things over.

There was something about watching grown men deep in their cups in the middle of the day—most likely a holdover from my past life—that left me with a despondent feeling.

“Now who ze ’ell are you?! Zis ain’t no place fer brats!”

“Ze fok ya doin’, slinkin’ ’round ’ere?!”

The mindless raging of these men—I’ve taken several liberties transcribing the *sounds* that came from their mouths—only served to cast the sorry state of the scene in a fouler light. That said, it wasn’t their fault. It’s not like they were making an effort to be unintelligible; they had simply picked up the Imperial tongue as a second language, and between the thickness of their accents and the occasional unpredictable slip back into their mother tongue, anyone would have had a hard time keeping up.

They’d made a worthy effort at being intimidating—top marks, really—but they were a ways out from “soil yourself” levels of terrifying. I gave a sidelong glance to Siegfried, who was somewhat taken aback by their blatantly antagonistic behavior. *Come on, my guy, you’ve thrown down with bastards five times scarier than these souses. Stand proud!*

“Excuse me, gentlemen. Is Mister Franz here? My name is Erich. I am here on business.”

I had taken the advice of my seniors on board and thrown myself into taking on aboveboard jobs. Naturally, my clients were straitlaced ilk—you know, the "help the honorable poor and strike down the unjust strong" kind of spiel.

"Ain'tnever'eardzename!"

The guy's speech was so distorted and badly enunciated that I wasn't sure for a moment what language he was speaking...if it even was one. Mostly, he seemed to treat speech as a vehicle for shouting. I could feel a headache coming on.

I wondered if these gentlemen and their *interesting* way of speaking was some western dialect? Or maybe they were from the peninsula that stuck out into the Aquamarine Sea? Their vocabulary seemed to have a common root with mine, at least, and their grammar held up, but it was hard for me to parse. Anyway, I had the inkling that they were telling me Franz wasn't here.

"Then how about Mister Franciscus? No? Mister Francis? Mister Francois? Ah, maybe Mister Firenze?"

Names in Rhinian took on different phonetics in different languages. I decided to throw out a few similar options for the gentlemen.

"Zefock yachattin' f'lishk rap, ya sackoshit! Ain't NO freakin' piezoshi tlyk himeer!"

Please, for the love of hygiene, stop spitting at me. Get your face out of mine and talk more slowly. And by all that's good and squeaky-clean, you stink. Brush your teeth! Take a bath!

"Man, this is getting boring. You wanna take over, Sieg?"

"C'mon, don't just give up like that! You're kinda necessary on this mission! For starters, I can't read the note!"

Yeah, I know, but these guys are a pain in my ass to talk to, let alone communicate with.

I would've been happy to resolve the matter with pure, naked violence (cause of and solution to all of life's problems that it was). Unfortunately for us, our client had political connections and an image to maintain, so that method was

off the table.

"Well," I said, "whatever the case, I'll read from the report. *Ahem*. 'Mister Franz engaged in property transactions with a certain Mister Manuel of East Street. However, the tax inspector, Mister Simon von Armhold has acknowledged in summary court the objection that Mister Franz has not only made threats against the client, but has also claimed a number of falsities during the purchase of the property. Therefore—'"

I wasn't able to finish. The thugs at the table had gotten up and were itching for a fight.

Of course it would end like this...

"Time to— Gwugh?!"

"Your breath stinks. Shove it."

One of the thugs had the audacity to spit on me, so I capitalized on the infuriating couple of inches he had on me by delivering an uppercut into the soft tissue where jaw met throat. I took a half step forward to avoid the drops of blood and dislodged incisors. *What was that blackish-red thing, though? The tip of his tongue...?*

"Now then, where was I? 'The representative has gone through the proper channels with the Adventurer's Association of Marsheim.'"

Finishing my half step, I gave a swift chop to the thug's exposed nape and snatched away the dagger dangling at his waist as he dropped. Since he'd hung it from his belt *backward*, it came out nice and easy.

What a nice present. We'd come empty-handed, as I had expected a nice, peaceful little message delivery—and we hadn't wanted to sully our client's image by showing up armed to the teeth—so a little field procurement was a huge help. Then again, it was starting to look like we'd have made our point more effectively if we *had* come loaded for bear; this was not a crowd that seemed terribly receptive to civil discourse. It was tough playing "good cop, bad cop" when the party you're negotiating with would have preferred "dead cop, also dead cop."

"Oy, Erich?! So we *are* gonna do it this way after all?!"

“‘I am here to report that our client demands that Mister Franz return the deed to this house and pay the legal fees owed to Mister Manuel.’”

“What are you, a monk lost in his chants?! If we’re doin’ this, put some *kick* in your voice, you lazy ass!”

Despite his complaints, my comrade was readying himself for battle. I was sure glad he caught on quickly. Just as I closed in to impart some physical justice, he knocked over a nearby chair and the thug atop it, rendering his attempts to draw his dagger futile. Then Sieg administered a swift kick to his chin, sending him straight to naptime. Evidently Siegfried’s experience in the ichor maze had taught him just how important it was to get in that finishing blow ASAP to avoid any trouble down the line.

“‘You are permitted to refute this claim within three days from the day of notice. If you acknowledge the claim, or if our client does not receive word that you refute it—’”

I deflected a swing from a longsword from one of the thugs, sidestepping him and severing the tendons in his armpit as I continued to read out the notice.

“‘—then he is, in the name of Margrave Marsheim, permitted to use material force or foreclosure to complete his claim.’”

Phew, all done. Now no one can complain.

The lengthy notice was a claim that the property in question had been bought unfairly by a would-be land shark. Tax collection in Rhine was enforced by officially appointed collectors, not small-time state employees hired from the general population.

In this case, an official complaint and report had been filed in regard to illicit property purchases, and so, as expected of any Imperial citizen, the collector had stepped in to help protect the law.

I got goose bumps thinking how well the taxation system of our fair Empire was implemented. It was true that outsourced tax collectors were as hated as loan sharks and crooks, but I was glad that the Empire wasn’t like medieval Europe, which used “fairly calculated” taxes as a front to drain their subjects dry. The Empire even had people like us making sure that both parties would be

treated fairly by delivering a notice. I felt like a true paragon of justice doing things by the book in a way that gave the other party—if they were willing—a chance to make a case for themselves.

Now that I had read the notice, we wouldn't get slammed for using force down the line. For adventurers in this line of work, if you made the right connections, then you had the legal and moral high ground. If our crooks here had graciously signed the notice declaring their guilt, that would have been a win. If they chose to bring the fight and we had to restrain them with force, booyah. If they signed and *then* brought the fight and were punished for violence, then great. Great for me, great for the government, great for the swindled party. A triple win.

As I folded up the notice, I ducked clear of the hammer bearing down on the side of my head. With no meat target to stop its momentum, it kept going until it crashed into one of the tavern's pillars. *Oof, talk about a fumble.* Thanking my assailant for this guaranteed win, I made two quick thrusts to the backs of his knees, leaving him hobbled. As he fell backward, I tag-teamed with gravity and rapped on the back of his head with my borrowed dagger's pommel.

Hm? That didn't feel great... Maybe I hit a little too hard. Let's hope his skull's not actually broken...

I wouldn't have minded sending a bunch of rent-seeking crooks straight to the lap of the gods, but as I often told my pals, *an alive crook fetches more coin*.

"Gah, Erich! Beating them up won't...*grah*...pad out our paycheck! So why...*hah*...are we doing this?!"

"Gurgh!"

As Siegfried complained, he deftly struck another legbreaker in the throat with the blunt end of a broom; the goon crumpled to the floor. *Look at Sieg! No hesitation to aim for the squishy spots when the going gets rough! But man, that's rough to see, even when it's some punk. A jab to the throat like that's gotta hurt a hell of a lot more than my little knife tricks.*

"Why?! Good question! We need to protect the reputation...of our good government! And if we hand them in...we get some pocket money!"

“Yeah, but...is it worth the effort?!”

Siegfried and I were chatting as we fought—I had just plunged my dagger into one of the fool’s shoulders, and Sieg had used a spear he’d picked up to strike at his foe’s gauntlets first before knocking them down. Between the two of us, we’d racked up a body count of six. Man, these guys sure were tenacious for a bunch of two-bit roughnecks! We’d taken down a third of their number. Why weren’t they backing down? I would have expected them to start making morale checks somewhere around the twenty-to-twenty-five percent mark.

“We all win...if social order improves!”

“We’re improving social order...by cracking heads?!”

Our battle lasted until twelve of the bastards were on the floor unconscious. The only ones left standing in the tavern were me, Siegfried, the barkeep crouched behind his counter, and a waitress cowering in the corner.

“Erich! The number ain’t addin’ up! There were fifteen in here when we arrived!”

And then...

“Gwaaagh!”

...a cry came from behind the tavern. Not just one—a splendid trio of wails.

“There we go,” I said.

“R-Right...”

We headed to the back exit—kicking the weapons away from unmoving hands in case anyone were to suddenly lunge at us—and found quite the sight.

One of the crooks had a rope around his neck—not quite tight enough to asphyxiate—and was struggling to break free. He must have set off a trap while rushing out. Another was stuck on the ground, affixed fast in some birdlime, looking like some mochi that had fallen in the gutter. The third and final crook was simply lying face down on the ground. Half of his face was embedded into the pavement, which made for quite the gruesome sight.

“You two were sloppy. How could you let *three* escape you?”

Enter my wonderful childhood friend. Our party's scout, who had just leaped down and taken up a new position hanging from my neck as she always did, had been sent to lay a trap by the back entrance and watch it just in case.

"They were livelier than I expected. Oh, and this notice was way longer than I was planning around."

"Shouldn't we have just used the allergy potion?"

Yes, Siegfried, it would have made it more efficient, and I'm just as annoyed we had to fight as you, but we live in a society with rules. Although we weren't acting *publicly,* we had received orders from the government, and that meant we had to play *everything* as tight-assed as possible. I was just as irked by the hoops we had to jump through, but complaining was akin to doing a bad job, so I bit my tongue. And in any case, this sort of tight regulation on our government's use of force meant we could avoid the typical pitfalls of your usual authoritarian state, happy to drag innocents into our cause and call it a day despite civilian losses while talking up our unimpeachable moral character and the ontological evil of the Enemy.

"Listen. I read the notice from start to finish. That puts us on the legal and moral high ground. We fulfilled our job to the letter and no one can fault us otherwise. It's annoying, but it's important to keep our business orthodox and decorous. That's half the reason you need to be amber-orange or above before they let you do this stuff."

"Ortho what and deco...what?"

"It means doing stuff by the book."

Siegfried muttered that it was probably because notices used such hoity-toity language like this that they pissed off your typical crook with no education to speak of. He was right, yeah, but unfortunately our job wasn't to draft up notices that people of all levels of literacy could understand.

"Now then."

I poured some of Kaya's bespoke anti-birdlime potion on the ground and set about tying up our bounty heads. I was a bit worried that we would run out of rope—I hadn't envisioned so many fighting back—but we just about made do. I

lined them up, taking them down to their skivvies to be absolutely sure they had no concealed weapons, then moved on to pinning down which one of these men was our Mister Franz.

“Barkeep?”

“Y-Yes?!”

“I would like your signature as a witness. Just to verify that we had delivered the notice as agreed. Not to worry; you won’t be in any danger. They’re all headed for the cells.”

They attacked us—unarmed workers out on behalf of the tax collector—and had tried to take our lives. They were destined for hard labor in the mines or, if they were subject to an unkind gaoler, the death penalty. They wouldn’t be harming anyone again.

“O-Of course.”

“Also, do you recognize the name ‘Franz’?”

The jenkin barkeep was crouched behind a barstool as I questioned him. It seemed like the gang had made this tavern their hideout, but hadn’t roped the owner into their illicit schemes.

“The name Franz isn’t ringing any bells, but the mensch who had collapsed in the middle of the room had a similar name,” he said.

“With the beard?”

“Y-Yes, him.”

Apparently their accents had been difficult for the barkeep to parse too—he wasn’t *completely* certain—but it was a useful step in the right direction. I rifled through Probably Franz’s clothes and found some keys among the dross he kept in his wallet. The barkeep told me one of them was for a room upstairs.

I was grateful that things were going so smoothly. If the key had belonged to some safe house on the other side of town, we’d most definitely have more fighting waiting for us in the pipeline; I really didn’t want to pick a fight with an entire mafia today. This job was only going to net us twenty-five librae for the four of us, and it was already draining my reserves.

“What’s up, Erich?”

It was Siegfried. I had taken one step up the stairs when I stopped.

“Are we legally allowed to raid his room? I *think* it would fall under our foreclosure clause, but...” I said.

“I don’t bloody know! Shut up and move it. If you mention any more of these stupid rules, you’ll be fighting *me* next!”

I nodded, happy that my bestest buddy would totally take the fall if we got nailed on this during the debriefing, and proceeded to climb up the stairs, jauntily jangling the keys in my off hand.

[Tips] It isn’t rare in the Trialist Empire of Rhine for the authority in legal issues to be entrusted to a third party in potentially hazardous conditions. Maintaining public order falls under the jurisdiction of those of the knight class, with their subordinates making up the patrols around local areas. As such, the government is perpetually short of personnel with the ability to enact legal measures.

We handed in our fresh-caught pack of wastoids to the guards a little before lunch. We had to file a small pile of paperwork before we finally received our payment, and by the time our business was dealt with, lunch had come and gone. If we ate now, we’d spoil our appetites for dinner. But! We were four teenagers—there was no way we would grin and bear it until evening came.

We raised our glasses together as we dug into a delightfully late lunch.

“Aww, yeah! Thaaank you, government!”

Siegfried was rubbing his hands together as he licked his lips.

I was in the same boat. The tax office held sway even here in Marsheim, and perhaps thanks to this discretion, we received our payment *before* our catch had even been dealt with by the higher-ups. Thanks to their foolish decision to try and snuff us out, we had received a hearty forty librae boost on top of our base pay. Our honest property manager—he was duly interviewed and looked into as well, just to make sure the whole operation was on the up-and-up—who

hadn’t shrunk in the face of their dealings had gotten his property back, the government maintained their reputation, and we adventurers had received a nice reward.

It was a bit touch and go, but this was a good job. I have my seniors to thank for their generosity. Yup, friends and connections are worth their weight in gold.

“Dee, are you going to be able to eat all of this?”

“Hell yeah I am! That exercise worked me up an appetite!”

Kaya’s concerns weren’t misplaced—the table was jam-packed with a veritable cornucopia of dishes. There was black bread—a staple in the Empire—with fatty wurst and sauerkraut to accompany it. We had splurged a little bit and gone in for some smoked herring and braised vegetables. It was a spread fit for a hardworking adventurer.

Now, reader, as you might have realized from the fact that all four of us were eating together, we were not in the Snoozing Kitten anymore.

Whereas Shymar’s cooking had an Imperial flair and used spices from the isles, here the food was seasoned in the style of the northeastern crescent peninsula up in the polar region. Their bread was unique in that it didn’t have a single grain of wheat in it, making it quite sour—and cheap—but it paired perfectly with smoked herring and dairy products.

All of these culinary delights from across the northern sea were made by the owner of the Snowy Silverwolf in an attempt to recreate the flavors of his home. There were a number of ingredients that were near impossible to procure—such as reindeer meat or fresh salmon—but being here really gave you a taste of the wider world while filling you up.

We had decided that we would move our base here for a while. The nice ladies at the Association had recommended us here, since it attracted a lot of rookie adventurers and maintained a good reputation. Now that we had found solid ground once more, it was time to engage in some social interaction.

Siegfried understood immediately that it was bad for us to have such a tiny social circle, and so he’d agreed that the Snowy Silverwolf was a good location

to meet decent people. Although when we first showed up, Mister John, the owner, had recommended we leave—in his words, “amber-orange adventurers should head someplace else”—but he gave his okay after we reasoned that we’d only been adventurers for a year now and as such were rookies at heart.

Mister John must have had some soft spot for greenhorns; he kept his prices sane and his rules *ironclad*. The man himself had long, wavy black hair that joined into a long and magnificent beard. He was surely still in his twenties, but his face was rough and chiseled. I got the impression that he’d been aged beyond his years by pretty grim circumstances.

I imagined that he had quite the history with roughhousing too. The inn had a huge fireplace—despite Marsheim never getting *that* cold—and above it hung a crossed sword and axe. They didn’t look like display pieces; they were at least as weathered as their owner. Here sat the symbols of a man who’d come by all his cold winters in the far north honestly.

Anyway, the cost of our dinner had been bumped up by twenty percent due to our higher earnings as amber-orange adventurers, but we were more than happy to set up shop here as we did jobs and got to know the people around us.

I had earned my moniker ages ago by now, but we still hadn’t really made much headway in our social network. Margit and I had lived quiet lives in the Snoozing Kitten and Siegfried and Kaya had been living in their own home, and we’d paid for it. I was starting to finally feel like our peers could put faces to the names.

After explaining our situation, Mister John could see that although we might have had some talent when it came to jobs, we were still wet behind the ears in many ways. I was honestly really grateful that he took the time to explain some basic things.

All that was left was to build some friendly connections. If we could form some links with people who could keep us clued in on the rumors flying around adventuring circles, then we could prepare more spontaneously and efficiently.

Siegfried tore off a hunk of bread and started layering various delicacies atop it while I set my knife and fork to heavy work. Although I preferred Shymar’s cooking, it was a good portion for the price and suited our big stomachs.

“It’s kinda weird,” Siegfried said, “I think our big payouts early in our career have made *normal* wages seem a bit small.”

I agreed. We’d been plugging away at a number of requests from our Nanna-approved mediator, and the sum they’d won us wasn’t paltry, but it didn’t arouse any excitement either.

Three days ago we’d been called in to deal with some thugs who were swindling locals. They were squatting in a building that was due to be torn down as part of the area’s redevelopment plan, but refused to answer any of the requests to move. The original owner had moved to another new property built by the same landowner, but these crooks had pounced on this opening and wouldn’t budge, simply asking for more and more money to get them to move someplace new.

Two days ago we were hired as bodyguards to help a distressed barkeeper whose tavern had been overrun by unsavory sorts. As soon as we arrived, they broke out into a small riot, which we subsequently solved. They were your typical low-rank, unorganized thugs. With a bit of gentle, kind, totally nonviolent persuasion, they left Marsheim for good.

And then there was today.

Each day had netted us twenty to thirty librae, which was a huge improvement compared to our days in the Infrared lane, but they required both a flexible mindset and skills to put ne’er-do-wells in their place.

After my big payouts from handing in Baltlinden alive and delivering a literary morsel to a voracious bookworm, these jobs just felt like pocket change.

“It’s not just that; I dunno, it doesn’t really feel like adventurin’.”

“Remember your soot-black days, friend. Would you class gutter cleaning and sewer inspection as ‘adventuring’?”

“He’s right, Dee,” Kaya said. “This feels far more like adventuring to me. We’re actually helping people with their problems.”

“Yeah, I guess so. And call me Siegfried! C’mon, we’re in public...”

It was easy to forget that adventures didn’t just roll into your lap while you

sat lazing about, mouth half-open during an afternoon nap. In all honesty, if a regular old adventuring party had found themselves confronting the cursed cedar ichor maze, they would have either run back home to ask a big-time adventurer like Mister Fidelio to fix the problem, or simply become a statistic to be tallied later for the academics to make a comparative statement on just how bad we all let the situation get. We had found our way out with our wits, our skills, and a couple miraculously lucky breaks, but the fact was such ichor mazes wouldn't come our way every day.

Our seniors had built their own systems to maximize their intended gains. Mister Fidelio searched for prey that would be worth battling before making the proper preparations for his quest. Miss Laurentius had created a format that would bring foes to her. These were the results of years of work.

It was natural that us newbies had to submit to the grind and pile up menial jobs. No one would send the most dangerous jobs to a scrawny group with no real street cred. We needed to mill through the proverbial goblins and farm for xp before heading out to take down a basilisk or a legendary sword-sworn dragon.

Everything came in its right order. If we wanted to hear the lines "You must save the world—you're our only hope!" then we needed to have the rep to back it up. If we got lax now, we wouldn't simply be one-hit wonders—we'd earn a reputation as lazy layabouts.

Plus, who could say? If we stuck to the straight and narrow, maybe a big job *would* come our way. The fun didn't just lie in character advancement—the small tasks that built up to greater ones were part of the joy too.

"Anyway," Sieg went on, "I guess it's better than running yourself ragged just to scrape together fifty assarii. Before we were cramming jobs into every daylight hour, so there was barely any time to train."

"Indeed," Margit said. "There are many adventurers who end up destroying their bodies through malnutrition and lack of sleep because they can't even afford a decent bed. We should be grateful that we have what we do."

"Exactly. Let's stick to the plan and take tomorrow off. We can stop by the Association on the way home today and check if there's anything good in the

foreseeable future.”

Siegfried was right. If you had a lifestyle where you lived hand to mouth, hoping that the next job would buy you one more night’s sleep, then you couldn’t train, you couldn’t afford decent gear, and you’d mentally and physically exhaust yourself.

As I was pondering just how many poor rookies had got caught in this awful, endless cycle, I noticed the sound of measured footsteps. I looked up and saw a single adventurer weaving between the tables, approaching us.

They were a huge audhumbla. Their fur was black and sleek, and their horns were healthy and pristine. To anyone from Earth it would look like someone just stuck an ox head atop a well-built frame; a mensch like myself was unable to assess their gender, let alone age.

Unlike an ox’s, an audhumbla’s eyes were set forward on their face so that they could see straight ahead like mensch did. However, their large snout, jaw, and hooves were decidedly unmenschly. As someone who wasn’t used to seeing them, I didn’t know what to look out for to distinguish one from their peers.

What I could say about this adventurer was that they bore few scars and that their air exuded a certain immature naivety to it.

The adventurer’s hooves clicked with solid steps as they approached us. There was a faint trace of tension in the air due to my Oozing Gravitas, but they had managed to overcome it. They had a courageous heart, that was for sure.

It was spring now, so perhaps this adventurer had come from a nearby canton to make their name? In place of a necklace, I caught a glimpse of an adventurer’s tag from the collar of their unfitted (seemingly) secondhand shirt. It was black. *Aha, so we’re his seniors, then.*

“You Goldilocks?”

“I am he. As you can see, I’m currently enjoying a late lunch. What do you need?”

“Heh, what a surprise. Didn’t think you’d be *this* small. Guess the poet didn’t lie in that regard.”

Audhumbla usually measured over two meters in height, and this one showed off the difference by standing right up in my business. There had been no formal greeting, just idle comments and an appraising glare. *Rather rude, if you asked me.*

Their voice was a little high, so I was right in my guess that they—he, probably—were young. His voice had finally dropped, but he didn't have the booming resonance that Stefano Heilbronn did. My estimation that he hadn't come of age as an audhumbla seemed to be on the money.

"Yeah," he went on. "I see why the song was all about your freakin' hair. You'd be better suited to weavin' than fightin', no?"

I retract my statement. He's not "rude," he's a churl.

Being a multicultural nation, the Empire's political rights were not so tied to gender—evident in how Lady Agrippina was a count, not a countess—but differences in physique and social consciousness meant certain jobs still carried pronounced gender markers.

Weaving was "women's work."

In summary, this newbie had come up to me without even saying hello and mocked me for (to crib a little from my past life's old social media habits) "being kind of fruity with it." Anyone else would have knocked his lights out. I was an adventurer, so naturally I refrained from violence.

"Oy. What's the big deal interrupting someone's meal, eh?"

As I contemplated my next move, Siegfried snapped. He had gotten up with enough force to rattle his chair; before I could even say anything, he'd stood between us.

"Don't you know a lick of manners? What's your rank, pal?"

"So you must be Siegfried the Lucky. Hah! Yeah, that's probably the only thing you got goin' for ya."

I could hear the air shift at that moment. It wasn't a palpable change, broken by the sound of a sword scraping in its scabbard, but a minute alteration in the air that my honed swordsman's senses caught.

Siegfried's anger was about ready to boil over.

I couldn't blame him—the comment would be enough to make anyone pop off. After all, a man he had never seen in his life had just said all he was good for was an asset completely out of his control.

I could see the muscles in my comrade's arm twitch as his hand grabbed a nearby fork. It was wooden, but it could cause some serious damage if used correctly.

"Sieg."

"Huh?"

I stood up and placed my hand on his elbow to defuse his rage. His arm was tense. I felt that if I had placed my hand elsewhere I might not have been able to hold him back. I had been putting in the hours with my training, but I couldn't look down on my pure frontliner in the event of a physical scuffle.

"Cool it. You could kill a man with that."

"What's the deal, man? He was chattin' shit about you too! Why'd you stop me?!"

The audhumbla had taken a step back. I could see the thought playing through his head: *If Goldilocks hadn't stopped him, I'd be mortally wounded or worse right now.*

From Siegfried's bloodlust, I guessed he was planning to go for the eyes. It doesn't matter what kind of thing you are; you can't train those to be any tougher.

"Siegfried, I'm happy that you got angry for me."

"What the actual—?! Like hell I'm getting angry for *you*!"

My comrade grabbed my shirt, but seemed to realize something in the face of my easy smile. He had watched me get mocked, got mocked himself in defense, and was about to resort to fisticuffs. There was no way he couldn't realize that I was right.

Ahh, I made a great ally in you, bud.

Siegfried's face went beet red, and he let go of my shirt with an aggressive push.

Thank you for this deliciously endearing tsundere moment. Doesn't matter if it's a girl or guy—it's cute either way.

"But listen, Sieg, the important thing is that if we make a scene, Mister John won't be happy."

I pointed to the bar counter, and there he was—glaring over at our table with narrowed eyes. Siegfried had been in the frying pan with me and knew what would come of ticking off a seasoned warrior.

"Oh...crap."

Mister John was a dab hand at concealing just how strong he was. I myself had no idea at what depths his strength lay. One thing was clear: he was bad news. At any rate, it wouldn't be good to get kicked out of this place after only ten days, especially after all the effort we went to just trying to get in.

There was something else. The most important thing, in fact.

"Order is important, Sieg. My turn comes before yours."

This adventurer had picked a fight with *me* first. I preferred it if my friend didn't steal my first dibs.

"Fair 'nough. Go on."

"You, me, behind the bike racks—er, to the yard now. If we settle this outside, then Mister John won't mind."

I didn't wait for an answer and made for the yard immediately. Just like almost every other inn, the Snowy Silverwolf had a shared open space for hanging up laundry. Many adventurers used the space to train or to cook their own meals.

"Now then, you seem to have some qualms about my appearance, so why don't we settle this right away?"

I spotted some kindling on the ground and kicked it up into the air. It was just a mite longer than your average dagger, but shorter than a sword. It would do.

“C’mon hoof ’n’ horns, draw your blade,” I said as I caught the kindling and thrust at the audhumbla. “You’re the one who came to me with a sword hanging at your waist. Or is it just for show?”

It wouldn’t be cool to let him proverbially walk all over me. More importantly, we were adventurers. We weren’t like bureaucrats who decided a pecking order based on rhetoric; we were thugs who let our blades speak for us.

“Or are you all bark and no bite? If you’re going to mock me for my appearance, then allow me to do the same—I think *you’d* be better suited to pulling a plow than fighting.”

I couldn’t let this younger adventurer forget that if you were going to dish it out, you had to take it too.

“You cocky little—!”

“Go on. Take it out. Or is a little piece of kindling held in a weaver’s hand really so terrifying?”

It seemed my verbal insults had finally got to him. He drew the longsword from his belt. It was shoddily made and poorly sharpened, but it was a hefty thing that would take all the might of an average mensch to wield. He had a strength befitting his size and held it easily in one hand.

He looks the part, but he’s lacking. If he’s holding it one-handed, then he should have one foot forward and one back. That or support the blade with his left hand, to help drive it forward.

In my eyes, he was wide open, begging me to strike anywhere.

“When I strike you down, don’t forget that *you* asked for it, shorty!”

“No worries, jumbo. It doesn’t matter how strong the weapon is if it doesn’t hit. Now come on if you’re hard enough.”

I placed my left foot back and stood ready to take him. I spun the kindling in my right hand and made a beckoning gesture with my left. Young and quick to anger, he charged at me. His first strike was a simple downward swing. Self-taught, most likely.

I parried it easily with the kindling and grazed the tip of his nose as he went

tumbling past me, his sword burying itself in the dirt. In an easy second movement, I grazed his wrists.

"Whuh?!"

"If this was a real fight, I would've sliced clean through your tendons. You'd never hold a sword again."

"You cocky piece of—!"

Unwilling to accept defeat, he pulled the sword out of the dirt and swung again. I ducked beneath it and gave his shin a quick jab. He curled forward in pain, so I decided to meet his jaw with the kindling.

"Gurgh!"

"I would have smashed right through your jaw. It would have been bye-bye tongue and so long solid meals for the rest of your life."

"GRAAAH!"

Filled with rage, he came at me once again with attack after attack, which I easily deflected before striking him—explaining each time what had gone wrong.

He's picked up some bad habits. He's been relying on his size and hasn't worked on his technique much at all.

Most adventurers who were twice the size of your average mensch and with the arm span to match could probably have made use of this extra range to win. Relying on stuff like this would *not* have flown in the Konigstuhl Watch's training sessions.

If Sir Lambert were here he would say this adventurer needed to learn everything from scratch before submitting them to the hundred practice swings hell—he would make you do it a thousand times if need be—but I was a kinder soul.

"You swing too wide and you don't step close enough. Do you *want* someone to cut your inner elbow when your arm's stretched out like that?"

Some races were born into this world stronger than others, but the truly strong could overcome this natural advantage. Anyone swift enough could step

right up close to him and turn his big body into one big target.

“Stop exposing your neck like that. I doubt it would hurt *too* much, but your life could be snuffed out with one simple stab.”

Not only that, it felt like he was letting the weight of his sword propel him forward. He was focusing on his weapon and his weapon alone.

“Good—when you get disarmed, pick it up right away. No one will wait for you in a real battle.”

A sword fighter’s weapon was their entire body, including the sword. Yet this audhumbla just let his left arm hang there, not grabbing at me or anything. He didn’t even attempt to kick at me. He was just obsessed with trying to strike me with his sword. To be honest, it was a crying shame that he was so unrefined. If it came to a pushing battle with crossed blades, he could easily use his weight to overpower his opponent. Why wasn’t he making use of any of it?

To someone like me, who constantly longed for a bigger, burlier build, this was an offense of the highest order. He had an amazing weapon at his fingertips, but he simply let it go unused and wasted!

“Oy, Erich! Stop playin’ around! I’ve noticed you ain’t moved your left leg this whole time!”

“Don’t spoil it, Siegfried! I wanted him to notice himself that I hadn’t moved my pivot foot!”

“Ahh, silly boy,” Margit said. “Erich was doing it on purpose, you know?”

Don’t show your hand so early, Sieg. I was still warming up!

As Siegfried had so uncouthly pointed out, I hadn’t moved a single step from my original location—my left foot had been planted firmly on the ground this whole time. I could twist left and right, but I had chosen my left foot, as I was right-handed. Fighting like this wasn’t just for fun or to tease my opponent.

“Gods dammit all!”

But, having realized he was being played with, the audhumbla lunged at me with his biggest windup yet. He openly lunged at me with an attack that was less of a tackle, more of a rampaging charge. I couldn’t tell if he would hit me

with his sword or his body first. What I could see was that he had finally started to treat his sword as something with a sharp edge, not just a metal bar.

“Very good.”

I finally had to move both my feet. It wasn’t a jump; it was a paper-thin slide out of the way. I ducked through his gaudy attack and struck at his torso as I went past. I admired this gutsy move—an attack that would’ve got me if I had no decent weapon, no equipment, and nowhere to reposition.

“Urgh!”

I knew little of him aside from his immature age, but under the skin there wasn’t much difference between him and any mensch. My attack would have cut through someone’s side, but since it was just a piece of wood, it struck at his unprotected stomach.

The rash adventurer had left so many openings this whole time, but I decided to repay his first decent attack with a proper one of my own.

“Yep, with this one, if you didn’t have some decent armor, your guts would be spilling out all over the floor.”

We were adventurers, not soldiers killed like chaff, so we couldn’t count on the simple arithmetic of “one troop, one enemy, two kills.” Adventurers were honed fighters who could eliminate the enemy on its own turf with a small force. A decent frontliner had to be able to be able to break the zero-sum game of traditional warfare over their knee.

“But with a strike like the one you just pulled, your opponent will become desperate too. If you don’t have a way of striking back or dodging, then you’ll be mincemeat. Adventures are full of give and take.”

I squatted before the audhumbla, who was wheezing on the ground with his arm around his stomach. I held out a hand to him.

“I won’t cheapen what you did by saying you’ve got ‘talent.’ What you showed me was determination and intent. When you truly commit to something—that’s when your resolve is tested.”

It didn’t matter what the impetus was. This thing had started because the

person he taunted had taunted him back and given him a solid thrashing afterward. But if your body could keep up with your emotions, then you might be suited to this game.

“You’ve got the right stuff.”

“I...do?”

“You do. Although you need to start from how to hold and use your body. You rely on your muscles and your natural strength too much. You might as well be swinging around a stick.”

In a daze, the audhumbla took my hand—his was *way* bigger, but for the sake of my mental health I won’t write how many inches—and I used his center of gravity and my own to help him to his feet.

I wouldn’t say he was on the path of the sword or anything so stuffy, but I wanted him to know that if he worked at it he could do what I did with his eyes closed.

“Now then, introductions are in order, no? I’m Erich of Konigstuhl, fourth son of Johannes. And you?”

“Etan... Youngest son of Evrard of Bertrix.”

“Good. I won’t forget it, Etan of Bertrix.”

There we go, lesson over. I had a vague memory that the phrasing I’d used was meant for talking to your seniors, but, whatever.

“Right. Let’s get back to our food. You’re satisfied, right, Siegfried?”

I smiled over at Siegfried, who was holding a broom that was about the same length as his spear. I expected that he had followed me out here with his own intentions of showing this young rookie his place after I was done. I wouldn’t stop him, but I felt our man had learned his lesson.

“Tch... Ugh, fine, whatever. Ain’t cool to kick a fellow when he’s down.”

Very good. Bertrix was a city quite far north of here. You’d waste an entire day if you got annoyed at every single rash adventurer who had come from the countryside. We had been on missions with our weapons recently, but people often assumed they were just for show.

“Ugh, but the food’s gone cold. Nothing’s worse than a cold wurst.”

“Agreed. Let’s get Mister John to reheat some of our spread.”

I clasped my arm around Siegfried’s shoulder and made to head back inside, when suddenly my free hand was grabbed. I had sensed him approach me, but Margit hadn’t stopped him, so he must not have intended to scrap again.

“Yes, Etan?”

“Erich... No, Mister Erich... No! Master!”

“Ex...cuse me?”

Turning around, I saw him looking at me with an expression that I had never received in my life. I’d been around the block, and I’d been the object of looks of all kinds—parental love, disinterest, hate, fear, bloodlust. But this...the nearest approximation of it I could dredge from my memory was the expression I’d see on the kids back in Konigstuhl when I did my little magic trick routine. It was admiration with a dash of awe.

“Please... Please take me as your apprentice!”

What on Earth was he saying? Master? Apprentice? I was only amber-orange, so why ask me? I still couldn’t properly look after my own affairs!

Etan’s grip was strong, and I could sense that he would never let go until I nodded in assent.

Seriously? Why? What’s going on? Why me?!

I looked at Margit and Siegfried for help, but she shrugged her shoulders, and he just let out an exasperated sigh.

No, hold on! Don’t just leave me hanging! I didn’t see this happening, I promise!

[Tips] Spring sees an influx of newbie adventurers. Solo adventurer-hopefuls head to a bigger city where they can make it on their own and go in search of party members or masters to take them under their wing. Not everyone is so lucky to set off from their hometown with close friends or partners.

Mister Fidelio'd told me to get along with my peers. He was completely right. Even I knew that some lateral connections would pay out in the long run. Still, I felt that the four of us made an efficient enough group. Plus, I was pretty sure that if we started dragging around a bunch of greenhorns, it'd damage our cred with our prospective clients. I really wanted to limit all this networking to picking up *acquaintances*.

"Don't swing with your arms, swing with your torsos. You need that push to cut through properly."

I didn't want to be like Miss Laurentius, with her gaggle of followers all hidden comfortably in the shadow of her titanic sword skills.

"Yes, sir!" came a chorus in reply.

Yet here I found myself looking after some young adventurers. Not long after Etan had taken a weird shine to me, the number of starry-eyed newbies clinging to my coattails had jumped to four. It hadn't even been that long since we moved to the Snowy Silverwolf...

I still didn't get it; it's not like I was outfitting them or managing their finances. They had chosen this inn because Mister John had a reputation for mentoring rookies, so why was *I* standing here teaching them the basics?

This whole situation got ahead of me before I could get a word in edgewise.

After the incident in the yard, I invited Etan to enjoy some of our late lunch. I thought that once he'd gone home and cooled off, he would come to his senses and forget about the whole "master" thing. I was completely wrong. As the days passed, his passion burned as brightly as ever, and on any given day that he wasn't busy with his own gigs, he'd be waiting in the main room of the Snowy Silverwolf until we came back. He had constantly bugged Mister John, asking when we'd be back, which ended up blowing up in *my* face. In the master of the house's words, I could sleep under his roof again as soon as I sorted out my new acolyte.

Thinking about leveraging my social skill purchases to brute force him out left me with a little pang of nausea. It turned out he was only *twelve,* in spite of his truck-like physique—I guessed that was just normal for audhumbla. Anyhow, I figured for my conscience's sake, I'd take a page from Mister John's book and

show the kid the ropes.

The gist of what Mister John had told me was that if you trained someone in the basics, then it would improve your own fundamentals. He was right, of course, and so I found myself feeling as if Mister John had skill-checked *me* into saying yes to Etan. I wasn't even anywhere near being the kind of adventurer I dreamed about, yet here I was with a disciple.

Then one thing led to another...

While I was walking Etan through his sword form, a goblin called Karsten came along and asked me to teach him too. He had watched my scuffle with Etan, and seeing that the audhumbla was now under my tutelage, he wanted in on it too.

Karsten had come up to Marsheim last winter, but something had happened in the time since which had dealt a big hit to his self-esteem. The conclusion he had drawn from this incident was that there was no way someone from a smaller race like him would ever attain glory through swinging a sword. But seeing some mensch take an audhumbla to school in the back lot had made something click for him.

"It'd be totally spineless of me to give up just because of my race!" he'd said to me. How could I say no to that? I wouldn't be able to sleep at night.

Two swiftly became three. The werewolf Mathieu had approached me in pretty much the same vein as Etan. He, too, had come to size me up after another round of tales of my exploits reached him, much to my embarrassment; he'd busted out laughing as soon as he saw me. Etan was present this time. I guessed seeing a walking reflection of his past self got under his skin. He and Mathieu ended up slugging it out.

Watching them brawl right there in the tavern, I could feel Mister John's furious gaze burn a hole into the back of my neck. I stepped in and ended the fight with one quick blow. Mathieu wasn't too happy about getting knocked out by a sucker punch, so he challenged Etan to a second bout as soon as he was on his feet again. He came to in the yard after we gave him a good splash with a bucket of cold water. The way he jumped right back in, passions ablaze, impressed me.

Audhumbla and werewolves ranked among the larger humanfolk species. It was a hell of a thing watching them trade blows. We'd stripped them of their weapons. Rockheaded greenhorns like them could settle their business with their fists until they'd proved they weren't a threat to themselves with anything deadlier. As I watched them fight, the economically minded part of my brain almost considered setting up a wrestling ring—it would have been a big draw.

The rest hardly needs explaining—the fact that Etan and Mathieu were practicing their swing side by side should tell you everything you need to know.

The fourth newcomer to my little parade was a mensch named Martyn. He was from a farming family in a nearby canton, and I felt a little kinship with him. Apparently he'd been forced out of the family home when the eldest son succeeded the household. Instead of finding other work in his canton, he'd decided to make it big in Marsheim. His situation wasn't too different from Siegfried's, and so my comrade had taken a shine to him and suggested I train him too.

Martyn was a big guy, but had a shy temperament. He had managed to make it to the city and register, but was struggling to find any allies. It must have taken quite some courage to call out to us when he saw us all together practicing in the yard.

It seemed like I had been buoyed by their passion, and in spite of myself I found myself taking care of these four. It was completely unlike when I gave advice to Dietrich—she had the basics down and fundamentally different anatomy—and I found myself struggling somewhat.

"Etan, you're still relying too much on your brute strength. If you want to swing the sword like a hammer, I suggest you put it down."

"I'm sorry!"

It was still early days, so I was in the midst of teaching them basic swordplay—mid-height swings, diagonal slashes, and thrusts. We could cover the more technical stuff once they'd absorbed their fundamentals. Everyone needed to start with a blank slate. If not, they'd lose all the important elements of the trickier or flashier techniques you cribbed from a real pro.

I couldn't help but think of an older friend from my old world—*I hope he's*

doing well back on Earth—who gave some advice to some younger friends for a game they'd never played before on how to trivialize just about every officially published enemy. He might have gone a little too far, because although we finished that campaign, it lost a bit of its heart along the way.

Learning from this experience, I tried my best to teach these rookies the basics without muddying the waters too much just yet. I wanted to do things the proper way, but a small part of me was tempted by the memories of steamrolling every encounter along the way...

All four of these newbies had missed out on joining their local Watches for one reason or another, and so had spent their days working on their own unique styles. This, in turn, meant they'd picked up some bad habits. *That* was what made it so much harder.

"Mathieu! Your step forward is two beats behind your sword swing. Werewolves have got crazy lower-body strength, right? It's all for nothing if you don't make good use of it."

"Sorry!"

I had used my blessing to improve the speed at which practice improved my skills, so a lot of what I did was mostly just based on instinct. In other words, it was difficult to turn my actual method into actionable instructions. *Here's a thought experiment for you: try explaining how to ride a bike with words alone.*

Ever since my first days training with the Watch, swinging a sword had become as natural as breathing. Now, with it put into perspective, I was stuck in a thought loop of being like, "But a vertical slash *is* a vertical slash!" It was extremely unsettling, like finding yourself contending with the vastness of space lying in bed at three in the morning.

"Karsten, I want more from your steps forward. You're a small fighter like me, so if you don't close the gap, you won't be able to strike your foe. You're agile, so use it to move quickly."

"S'rry!"

Dear reader, have you not ever had a similar experience? Those nights where you suddenly wonder how it is we breathe? Trying to sleep on your side and

feeling acutely aware of your arm, even though you slept normally the last thousand nights? Being suddenly really conscious of where your tongue is? We move our bodies without thought and without much understanding of how it's put together; when we think about it, it feels really weird.

It was a strange feeling, being unable to verbalize something that was so fundamental to my way of life. I supposed it was a type of philosophy. The philosophy of the blade—"the sanctioned action of this world is to *cut*," "there is no such thing as a sword," "reach heaven through violence," yadda yadda yadda...

"Martyn! I want you to feel like you're throwing your body forward when you swing! You're holding your sword as far as you can from your body, but that's no good! If you're scared of your enemy, then you can't get the power in there."

I had moments in battle where my sword skill had so shocked an enemy, akin to making them lose a Sanity check, that it actually gave me the edge. Whenever it came to a life-and-death situation, I would make use of any methods at my disposal to make sure my position was superior to my enemy's.

In other words: *proudly do stuff that your enemy's going to* hate.

By dissecting my skills and abilities here, I was able to understand some of my own weaknesses and realize how to avoid certain traps along the way. It was a real satisfying relief to finally understand the theory behind all those things I'd just done by instinct! Thanks to that, my path after finally attaining Absolute Charisma had become clear.

Teaching was a way of knowing yourself—Mister John's advice had seemed offhand at the time, but it was incredibly valuable. *I'm sorry for thinking this would be a drag at the beginning, world.*

A range of experience could invigorate my own ideas and thoughts; anything could be looped back to the ultimate aim of enhancing the adventuring process. Not only that, this was a huge step toward the promise I made to the cutest little sister in the world, Elisa, that I would become a cool adventurer.

I had been so self-absorbed! I wanted to get down on my knees and apologize to Mister John, but I knew he would just be taken aback, so I bit my tongue. All

the same, I always thanked him internally whenever I saw him.

One's thoughts were the basis of one's ego. As Aristotle had said, one's reason takes shape when one puts one's thoughts into words. This whole episode had been such a lesson that it made me feel closer to him than to Descartes.

All that aside, I was also just jazzed because I'd finally started following through on Mister Fidelio's advice.

Unfortunately, I wasn't making much headway in building connections with anyone other than these four. Despite moving our base to the Snowy Silverwolf, I still felt that other people kept their distance from me. Siegfried and Kaya were still the only people who I could count as friends. It puzzled me. No matter how much I churned these thoughts, a clear answer wouldn't come.

What I did have was the blade, and what the philosophy of the sword had to say in the matter was simple and predictable: the problem could be solved with a continuous cutting motion.

[Tips] Too many NPCs can cause a scenario to grow unnecessarily complex. Most capable GMs will limit the number of characters so that the story doesn't grow too bloated, but in the real world, people will approach you of their own free will. As such, there are very few cases where a party of a small few will achieve truly world-shaking feats.

Etan was a bona fide, squeaky-clean, Level 1 Fighter.

All the same, he had always been confident in his skill. However, life in his hometown of Bertrix hadn't always been easy. He was a farmer's boy, and his prowess in the fields meant that he was held back from seeing the world until he was twelve—two years after coming of age. He was blessed with a rare strength, even for an audhumbla. This was no mere bit of wishful thinking on his parents' part; where the strongest ox or horse strained against the weight of the plow, Etan pushed along breezy and unbothered. This physical prowess meant that the landlord was reluctant to let such an incredible talent go.

He was valued for his incredible labor in the fields, but it didn't seem to earn

him any exceptional trust in him as a person. He was treated as little more than an especially pliant and efficient piece of farm equipment. It didn't take a genius to see why this youngster would want to leave his canton, at least in the broad strokes.

There was no one keeping him home. His parents had passed from illness well before he came of age. He had no friends. The mensch children had kept him at arm's length ever since he accidentally broke one of his peers' arms while playing, simply unaware of his own strength.

No one hesitated to force any and all tasks upon the young Etan. While it could be said that the landlord took care of him, the fact of the matter was that from the age of seven, Etan was worked to the bone with barely a single day's break, and paid only in food.

It didn't take too much for Etan to see the appeal of an independent life, with only a sword at his waist as an ally. It just seemed so *cool*. The uneducated youngster had been so easily swayed by a poet's tale that he made the move to Marsheim to become an adventurer.

Yet things in life do not go as easily as one might wish. The only gigs where he could apply the strength on which he prided himself were boring day jobs transporting goods. It was a far cry from his dreams of heroism.

Another reality he had to face was the pain of rent. With the bulk of his income consumed by his need for a place to rest, starvation loomed at his doorstep mere days after his arrival in Marsheim. Prices were just so different in the city. Back home, he had cooked for himself, and food had come easily to him—like little else had.

Here in Marsheim a good day's work would only amount to fifty assarii. If this had been enough to sate an audhumbla's stomach, then there would never have been a refugee encampment in all Ende Erde.

As the days dragged on, Etan began to believe that perhaps heroes of the ilk sung about in songs in fact did not, could not exist. His head full of such thoughts, Etan was sitting on a bench near the Association by Adrian Imperial Plaza when he heard a nearby poet singing a certain tale.

The accompaniment was on the shoddy side, sounding as if it had been

hurriedly copied from someone else, but the details of a young adventurer achieving glory struck at Etan's unsatisfied stomach and weary mind. Propelled by nothing but his needling hunger, Etan decided to see this hero in person.

Reaching the Snowy Silverwolf, Etan was surprised when he saw Goldilocks in the flesh. It was easy to spot him—at a table of four, he spotted someone who seemed *different.* He seemed out of place; there was too much glamor on him compared to the humble character of the tavern itself. His clothes were patched-together old things, but he had a grave aura more suited to a tax collector passing through the canton than an adventurer.

Goldilocks sat with a perfectly straight back, but still seemed to leave zero openings. He held his knife and fork gracefully and silently. His hair, for which he had earned his namesake, reached the small of his back. It was well taken care of, its sheen putting even noble ladies to shame. Along with his sparkling blue eyes, he seemed almost womanly, somehow.

All the same, his easy smile and posture weren't weak in the slightest.

Etan could sense the narrowing of those baby blues and the fierceness that lay behind them as soon as he drew close to Goldilocks. It was an aura cast by Oozing Gravitas—something that prevented almost anyone from even approaching him. But Etan's sense of better judgment was worn down enough by hunger to let him ignore that blazing aura.

Erich moaned that adventurers his age hardly ever talked to him, but this was thanks to his own choice of passive abilities—he'd yet to fully grasp the consequences of his build.

Etan crossed this line and confronted Goldilocks.

What came next does not bear repeating. Etan was a changed man. There was no chance that he would not be shaken by this fellow who had taken time out of his time off to not only satiate his thirst for a fight, but to share his lunch with him. Etan surmised that he just didn't understand how *normal* adventurers worked—just as how a dog could never understand a wolf. After all, before Etan, Siegfried, too, had been antagonistic with Erich.

Goldilocks had an intense aura about him that was so at odds with his appearance that it viscerally dismayed Etan. Then there was his measured

palatial speech, only barely familiar to the average country mouse. To top it off was the fame he had earned in toppling a name that everyone in Marsheim knew: Jonas Baltlinden. If you had gone to see the Infernal Knight, even one look would have filled you with fear—even with his tendons cut and strung up on a cart, Baltlinden still had a terrifying aura about him. It wasn't much of a leap to see just how incredible Goldilocks must have been to have bested him.

All the same, Goldilocks didn't seem to even register this feat—although, in truth, Erich had forgotten most of the clamor surrounding the event, as he didn't bother going to the public execution—and his disciples were kind enough to not point out the incongruence of this aspect of their master. If someone brought it up so brazenly, then their ignorance would come off as mockery.

"Now that dinner's over, let's head to the baths."

Erich had given his new students a meal of *daunting* size.

"Uh, really?" Karsten said with confusion.

To these poor adventurers, the baths were a luxury. *Since when was looking good necessary for the job?* they thought.

"Didn't we already splash ourselves down with the well water?" Etan said.

"Listen guys, appearances are important," Erich said with utmost patience and kindness. "Remember the stories! Can you recall any hero who was famed for being grimy and wearing filthy clothes?"

The four soot-black rookies looked at one another with expressions that said, *Now that you mention it...*

The heroic tales they had heard occasionally put the lens on their hero's tidy appearance, but hardly did they ever describe them as filthy. Sometimes a wandering hero may be described as cutting a ragged figure, but generally poor hygiene was reserved for the descriptions of villains.

"The Imperial baths are only five assarii. It would be a waste to try and save five assarii today and miss out on fifty tomorrow."

Erich used a real-life example to explain the importance of hygiene to his new students. He wasn't asking them to smell like roses, but advised them to head

to the baths every three days and to make sure they wore clean clothes. Even this small change would do wonders in their negotiations with clients. It reflected poorly on a person to judge on appearances alone, obviously, but basic cleanliness was an absolute must for work as customer-facing as adventuring.

Between a bad personality and an offensive odor, the latter was far more easily controlled and had far more direct ramifications on business—so why *not* scrub up as best as possible? Promotions didn't come to those with bad reps.

"I'm not asking you all to go out and burn incense, but make sure you don't smell of sweat, your hair's not too greasy, and your beard is shaved or trimmed. Just doing that can really change how people view and treat you. Who knows, if you keep it up, you'll get personal requests soon enough."

Now that Goldilocks had decided he would look after these strays, he wanted to do the job properly. As such, he taught not only the basics of swordplay, but tips to expedite their journeys toward fame. It was important to teach them what to do on the job and how to protect themselves, but dealing with people was just as key to the trade.

"Unfortunately, I would say that most people base the better part of their first impressions off of looks—eighty percent, maybe?—and the rest off personality. If you want people to take a chance and realize just how great you are, then you first need to grapple with how they'll view you."

It would take an absolute genius and inimitable talent to rise through the ranks without doing so. Erich also chose not to force the matter—if their values were impinged upon too much, it would no longer be education.

"Keeping myself neat's landed me free meals, little day-to-day pick-me-ups—you should never overlook the morale boost of a little something sweet from a client—hell, it's even won me a little bonus pay here and there. There's nothing to lose."

"Seriously?!"

"Seriously. If you greet your client in a graceful way, then they'll look on you kindly from the get-go. I'll teach you some basic palatial speech next time. It doesn't cost a single libra to learn how to be polite, but it can get you so much. I

mean, don’t you feel respected when people talk to you politely?”

The four rookies could only nod along as the germ of the idea took root in them. It would do no good to act too high and mighty, so Erich had toned down his palatial speech to be more familiar. With the right diction, he had created a sense of amity among the group.

“Decorum’s like chain mail,” Erich went on. “You cover yourself in it, and it soaks up a fair bit of the hurt that comes your way without you really even trying. No one wants to be slapped by a noble just because they accidentally offended them, do they?”

The four rookies were making mental notes of these critical and entirely novel lessons. However, none were confident they could ever reach Goldilocks’s level —cutting his food and eating it without a sound or a drop of sauce on his shirt seemed beyond them. The fact that he could do simple acts like pushing his chair back and standing up without a single sound spoke of the world in which he had lived. Each among them couldn’t believe that Erich was simply the fourth son of a farmer and had never been to a private school before.

“That’s not all. Some say it helps with chatting up the ladies...” Erich said. He gave the rookies a cheeky smirk. Then his hands froze and the smile dropped from his face. A ripple of fighting spirit ran down his knife. The four rookies all froze in fear, realizing that Goldilocks could cut through any of their rib cages as easily as he did the meat before him.

“Eep!”

There was a cry from near the door—the visitor must have sensed Goldilocks’s bloodlust too. Their hood obscured their face, unmoved as they trembled at the threshold. Goldilocks had sensed something the rookies had not: mana waves.

“Goldilocks, please.”

“My apologies. A bad habit.”

The tension had registered further than Goldilocks’s table. A few others in the room with a sense for these things stood up or accidentally knocked their drinks over. John barked at Erich from across the counter in reprimand. The problem

was that Erich simply couldn't remain at ease when he could sense the vestiges of magic from someone blessed with the power of ornithurgy.

He knew this register of mana too well—the Baldur Clan's very own Uzu had come calling. The fact that she was here on her own meant she must have come with a request of the utmost urgence.

Uzu approached the table with tottering steps, still traumatized by her first run-in with Erich—although it was Margit who had dealt the painful blow. Goldilocks pulled out a napkin seemingly out of nowhere and wiped his mouth as he adjusted his posture. It was a smooth movement that didn't seem to indicate anything in particular, yet it was like a metaphorical sword at the neck —*I hope what you show me is worth my time*.

"A pressing matter, I presume?"

"Y-Yes... I-If possible, please respond immediately," Uzu said as she pulled a wax-sealed letter from her pocket.

From his seat beside Erich, Etan could see the crest embedded in the wax: a crow holding an eye in its mouth. Even a rookie who had only come to Marsheim this past spring knew the emblem of one of the town's most infamous clans.

Ignoring his disciples' surprise at this unexpected connection, Erich opened the letter and began to parse the difficult court process letter and its measured handwriting.

"I'll be with you in two hours or so."

"Th-Thank you."

Erich watched off the mage, who practically fled the scene, and balled up the letter before putting it in his own pocket. Evidently disgruntled, he stood up.

"Apologies everyone, something's come up. Use this to settle the bill."

With an easy, silent movement Erich drew out five silver pieces with such dexterity that no one could see where he had pulled them from. The message was clear: *tell no one what you saw. Head to the baths after dinner as if nothing had happened here*.

A nervous sweat broke out on the foreheads of the four rookies present as they gave an uneasy nod.

[Tips] In a monarchy, the easiest excuse that higher-ups can give to those below them is to tell them that their manners were poor. There is no coherent metric for etiquette, and even a third party has no way of refuting such a statement. As such, it is a popular and oft-used excuse.

It was a day off, so no one had plans, but dealing with clans was entirely my job—back when I'd first introduced Siegfried to Miss Laurentius, he'd been pretty clear with me that he didn't want to handle meetings with anyone as scary as her or as shady as Nanna again— so it didn't take long for me to get prepared to head out.

I slipped into some clothes—slightly fancier than my usual garb, but nothing too unadventurous—that I had bought in case I had to take on a noble's request through a mediator, slipped on my freshly shined boots, affixed Schutzwolfe to my belt, then made for the Baldur Clan hideout. Before I'd even stepped through the door, I could sense an uneasy aura emanating from behind it—it felt as if the manor itself were a catalyst for its owner's rage.

"This is going to be *ugly*..."

I couldn't help but scratch my head—it messed up my hair a little, but that didn't matter anymore, considering the circumstances—at this sign.

I entered the manor, walking face-first into a *heinous* atmosphere. This was no metaphor—the very *air* was thick with a richly colored smoke that hung about my ankles. It seeped through the room like a theme park's haunted mansion, and a number of clan members caught in its miasma were zonked out, frothing at the mouth. Ghastly technicolor froth crusted their lips.

I worried that their lives might be in danger, but seeing as they were just left there, it couldn't have been anything too life-threatening. I *was* a bit concerned by Nanna's cavalier attitude toward her people; they were lying on the floor like discarded furniture. Surely she was obliged to treat them with a modicum of decency? But, well, she was a madwoman whose drugs played with our

perception of reality in itself—normal she was not.

“The b-boss is waiting inside...” Uzu said with her usual faltering tone.

“Thanks.”

If Nanna’s valued student was *this* terrified, the situation must have been pretty bad. Her patience must have reached its limits a long time ago. I walked through the door behind Uzu and into a veritable cloud of the unnerving smoke. My Insulating Barrier was keeping me safe, but I couldn’t help flinching.

“You’re here.”

Couldn’t you at least have pared your latest project down to red and blue pills, and spared me this garish clown-vomit palette? Heaven knows your dollar-store philosophizing would go down smoother if we were all in leather trench coats and mirror shades.

“Greetings. I thought it might be prudent to ask what might prompt such—pardon my impudence for saying so—nakedly unchecked mana flow?”

My barrier protected my lungs, but it didn’t actually stop the smoke from circling around me. It made me feel queasy to look at; I fanned it out of my face as I made my way to her side. I understood that Nanna wasn’t one for manners, but her obvious anger was awkward to be around.

It wasn’t as intense as the icy chill that emanated from Lady Leizniz when she met Lady Agrippina at the College entrance, but this physical manifestation of her rage would have made a regular person drop on the spot. Uzu had collapsed behind me as soon as the door had opened, and she had built up quite the resistance to Nanna’s various failed concoctions. Just what was she smoking right now?

“That’s just...how untethered my anger has become.”

As she spoke, the smoke got thicker, flowing with her breath. It carried a sheet of paper toward me. No, not paper, although that was the closest description for it. It caught the light, played with it, and let it go like crystal. I had heard that a magus somewhere had once demonstrated his prowess with material conjuration through crystalline sculpture. I wondered if it had any relation to that.

“What is this?” I said.

As I looked at the postcard-sized “paper,” I saw that lines ran across it, allowing it to be ripped into pieces about the size of a postage stamp. It was pretty and kids would probably squeal with how much it looked like it was ripped straight from some fairytale, but I highly doubted it was meant to replace a wax seal. *Wait, if Nanna was showing it to me—I mean, I guess it* has *to be more drugs.*

“It has many names. Crystal Blood...Ice Breath...and...Kykeon.”

Of course! Ugh, and I touched it...

It was filthy in more ways than one. I threw it onto the table. I made a mental note to wash my hands later...

“So I imagine you rip off a piece and ingest it?”

“You do. Have you...seen this before?”

“No, but I can make an educated guess. What are its effects?”

I could almost see the venom amid the smoke as Nanna huffed. A deep resentment was twisted into each and every word of her explanation.

“The hallucinations and intoxication are the same...as Elefsina’s Eye. Yet this one...robs you of fatigue. It sharpens your senses...to make you feel omnipotent. It even...transforms the pain of hunger into pleasure.”

“Sounds incredible.”

“Incredible, you say?!”

Another intense purl of smoke rippled through the room, like the shadow of a dragon.

Crap, she’s got mana for days! My barrier whined in response, and I pumped more of my own mana into keeping it and myself intact.

“It only lasts...four to six hours...at best! And then it gives you an awful delirium, withered nerve endings, and an enfeebling addiction! Get hooked...and you’re nothing more than a wasteful sack of meat!”

“Okay, okay! I get it! So please, calm yourself! My talisman’s going to

shatter!”

In line with Lady Agrippina’s request, I’d told Nanna that my barrier came from an item, not my own spell, so I needed to at least keep up that pretense.

All the same, she’d told me something quite unbelievable. What she’d described was pretty much an amphetamine! *What kind of hell am I in to have to deal with a cocktail of two dangerous drugs in a matter of weeks?!* They were both alkaloid-based, but hallucinations and delirium? Being robbed of any bodily discomfort? Was someone trying to manufacture an army of fearless junkie soldiers?!

“What I’m aiming for,” Nanna said, her anger still not fully quelled, “is freedom from the constant pain of living! Freedom from the traps of the senses, indistinguishable from a stone on the side of the road! This...this...filth, this base vehicle for *sentiment*... I can’t even label it a failure! It’s garbage!”

Nanna’s terrifying rage came from a completely different place.

I suddenly remembered something Nanna had told me once. When she was still a magus-in-training, she’d wanted to create a potion that would elevate all of humanfolk to the same level as methuselah—perfect organisms, immune to time and hunger. Around this time, she had studied the workings of the brain to help a friend who suffered from acute color blindness. Yet she had fallen into a great despair and resignation when she came upon the high wall between our senses and our cognition.

It was no surprise—Descartes himself had never managed to solve the mind-body problem.

Our physical bodies contained the mind and created feelings of pleasure or discomfort based on outside stimuli. That meant there was no way we could move this internal function out of our bodies. Pain would always be painful; joy would always be joyful. Of course, there were discrepancies in how each person took in information and what feelings came out, but at the end of the day people could not rid themselves of their sensory system.

Many rationalist philosophers had tried many methods to solve this issue in my old world, but no answer had been found—at least by the time of my death.

That said, I had to acknowledge that the future Buddha Maitreya's predecessor, Siddhartha, had achieved enlightenment. The teachings that led to his enlightenment had passed through so many translations that its meaning had become somewhat obfuscated, and so it would take 5.6 billion years—if I remembered what the future Buddha said correctly, that was how long it would take him—for normal people to realize what enlightenment really meant. In the meantime, they would kind of just attempt to clear their minds and realize that all emotions were false on their journey to nirvana.

"It simply destroys the brain and squeezes out every last drop of 'pleasure'! It's fake concentration, pure evil! Ecstasy based on pure fallacy! My failures...only serve to bring the pain of the world into relief...but this, it...it...!"

Nanna worked herself into another panic as she spoke—her hands scraped at her head and she kicked out at the table with the Kykeon on it. I was surprised just how much force her kick had for such a fragile-looking frame. If she had drugs that strengthened the body, I guess it was no surprise that she'd taken them for herself already. Her cute looks in her youth had pulled her into the School of Daybreak, but I started to wonder if she would have lived a happier life if she'd studied in the School of Setting Sun...

"I won't stand...for such filth!"

At any rate, our conversation was going nowhere. I avoided her flailing arms and legs and pushed her back down into her seat, where she wheezed for a few moments.

"Calm now?"

Despite her physical strength, her body was as light as it looked. I had put in a little too much oomph and I had ended up falling a little bit forward too—my face was right up in hers, taking both barrels of her crazed expression. Technicolor smoke gathered into whirlpools in her eyes. Prismatic bubbles bobbed to the surface, bursting every now and then, forming jittering congeries of concentric circles. Nanna's pupils were unfocused. Something in my brain told me to look away from those eyes. The alarm bells grew ever louder as I stared. I kept my gaze focused on hers, and eventually she regained her focus. The swirling rainbow rings followed suit.

“I apologize...for behaving like that.”

“It’s fine. If I’d found out that someone was mass-producing god-felling swords, then my pride as a swordsman would probably propel me to the same.”

Anyone with a real attachment to something would probably lose their head, knowing they lived under the same sky as something blasphemous to that affection.

Nanna let go of my wrists and readjusted herself in her seat. By the time I had returned to my own seat, Nanna had regained all of her usual lethargic coolness.

“Now then...the reason I called you here...was because I wish to make a strenuous effort in eliminating this *thing*. One scrap costs you ten assarii. One whole paper of eight scraps is discounted to seventy.”

Nanna went on to tell me that the market had been softened by Elefsina’s Eye, and whoever was behind this was trying to ruin the economy for good. The people behind the scenes weren’t in this to get rich—they were here to numb the brains of everyone in Ende Erde.

“I still haven’t...worked out what it’s made from. I can say that quite potent magic has been used. Even if the original ingredients are cheap...labor and distribution must be astronomical... They are very much underselling it.”

“So they don’t want to make a profit.”

“It’s an attack on Marsheim. That’s probably the correct estimation. Because it’s so cheap and abundant...and the dealers are so badly informed...no one can grasp where it’s coming from.”

Are you for real? This is like a mini version of Qing dynasty China in the throes of the Opium War... Dulling a town with drugs is so not *on the table for a fantasy world...*

“It’s not just the city. It has been spotted in farming cantons...across Ende Erde. I want you and your clan...to help me collect information.”

“I’m not against helping if it’s for the sake of— Hold on. Did you say ‘clan’?”

Yet again I was stumped by the things that came out of this woman’s mouth. I

didn’t have a clan. Yes, I had a few rookies who called me “master,” but we were just a training group, really. I wasn’t some mafioso who wanted to rake in stacks of bills. I was just helping them a bit with lining up better gigs than the dirt-tier assignments they’d been picking up. I was only amber-orange! I wasn’t even out of the realm of a low-rank adventurer! I had no backers, no influence in my area—nothing.

“It isn’t about what *you* think... It’s about how *others* view you.”

The only thing I got from Nanna for my quip was a dry laugh. She went on to explain that my feats in felling a big name who had been plaguing the region for over a decade and my acquisition of four underlings had been more than enough to position me as a clan head in the eyes of others. She then told me of all the rumors about how Goldilocks Erich was making connections with Marsheim’s biggest clans. In short, despite my every intention, word had got around that I had started a clan.

Ahh, crap... Where did I go wrong? No, I’m the one who said I wanted more numbers, and Mister Fidelio’s advice was totally right. But seriously, a clan? Why?! A party’s fun, but I didn’t think things would end up like this!

“Your head count will surely go up, no? Then...I advise you accept your situation.”

“Yeah, but I don’t want to start taking money from rookies.”

In truth, Nanna was probably right. I had four already; a fifth would crop up before long. Our party had a talented scout and mage—there were sure to be cowardly newbies who wanted to hide in their shadow. The logic held that it might be better to set up an official clan before things got too out of hand. It would be better than the vague gaggle that we had now.

I could do things differently from how the clans around me ran things—I wouldn’t take a cut, and I’d continue to train the newbies. By successfully doing jobs with capable members, I could deepen my bonds with those in power here and elevate myself away from all the unnecessary parts of life.

It was a Marsheim-y, adventurer-y way of doing things, but it felt...dirty somehow.

All the same, if it was the thrill of adventure that I was set on, then I couldn't look down on building connections to elevate my fame. Logic demanded I should recruit some more people. If I just helped them during the hard first days, then sent them on their merry way, I imagined that they would hate me for being heartless.

As they said in Japan, "Fish will not live in water that is too clean." In other words, if I chose to be *too* upright, then folks would give me a wide berth. That was the long and the short of it.

"Even if people crave solitude...they cannot avoid forming bonds with others. Then they can share...the pain and suffering...that plays out inside their minds. Sharing this pain is the way of the world." In the time that Nanna spent raging, the kindling of her water pipe must have died down; she was puffing into it to relight it as she muttered. "Wherever you go...the world only exists...under this pathetic layer of bone. The hell outside our minds...only seeks to make the one inside our minds...ever worse."

People could not live without others—even methuselah who live endless lives without sustenance or vampires who need blood to survive. There could be no exception. This went especially for us mortal folk, who could change our character on a dime if denied the stuff of life. We were complex creatures, as fickle as insects coming and going with the slightest change in the air pressure.

I didn't share Nanna's antinatalist perceptions, but she was right in describing her own situation as hell. It was easy to sweep things under the table by saying it was all about how you took it, but there was no liberation for the soul of the Baldur Clan's leader, who couldn't even find lasting relief through her drugs. If such platitudes could save her, then she would never have gotten to this point.

"So many rookies, too, are easily dirtied...trodden down by the despair that their dreams...are so at odds with reality."

The water pipe had returned to life, and the magically enhanced smoke seeped back into her wracked brain.

"You're not wrong," I said. "Twenty days of gutter cleaning and other menial chores is enough to make even the hardiest newbies start to lose hope."

"Do you take pity...on me...and them?"

I couldn't say anything too righteous. I wouldn't say that I had zero complaints or issues, but I was truly fortunate, really. If I had *nothing* keeping me going, then I'd surely have given up hope somewhere along the way. If I didn't have loving parents, kind brothers, the cutest sister in the world—maybe my life would have been much less hopeful. And then there was the biggest boon I had all to myself—if I didn't have the freedom to shape myself as I willed, then how would my life have gone?

I had been born with a metaphorical silver spoon in my mouth; I was in no position to be proselytizing to other people about my philosophical ideals. I was blessed with a guarantee that my hard work would result in something concrete. Someone like her, who'd snatched all her gifts from the jaws of a spiteful world, would feel nothing but scorn for such a wondrous gift. All I could offer was an open ear as I puffed on my own pipe.

"How cruel you are... Most would laugh...or offer empty sympathy...even as I am lost...to sentiment."

Dammit, I thought, *even I'm not so ruthless that my heart doesn't twinge at this, however much I'd rather be anywhere else. There's not even anything I can do for her.*

"In return...would you mind...trying this for me?" The dispirited woman pointed her pipe toward me. "I will be fighting for my own beliefs this time...not simply in the name of my clan." Her words were heavy with her emotions—almost as solid as smoke as they reached my ears. Her resolve was clear. She had forgone all lies and compromise. "As such, it's only fair I warn you..."

If you held something that you would never concede on, then there would come a time when someone or something would clash with it. For Nanna, that was her foul drugs. She wasn't a good person, that was certain—she crafted potions that showed you sweet dreams and in turn swiftly left you unable to sleep at night without it. She wasn't like the unknown foe before us, but in her own way she glutted Marsheim with her own mind-altering medications, all to peddle her own twisted dreams.

"If you continue to pursue things without compromise...soon you will hit a wall. I wish...to use this to see...if you can overcome it."

"A wall, huh."

"Exactly. Human life becomes hell when one comes upon...the walls and pits that mark its outer bounds. My own hell...is as deep as the ocean...and I tried to fill it with a medicine spoon. But what about you?"

Nanna's question was clear. If I chose to stay in Marsheim, I was bound to end up right in the middle of the inevitable breakdown of its tenuous order. I was free to flee from it, but I was also free to face it. The problem was if my resolve was lacking, then I was bound to be crushed by whatever lay on the horizon.

What Nanna wanted me to do was take a puff from her water pipe. After I had, she could make a judgment on my answer to her question. It was a litmus test—albeit one founded on principles and measures I couldn't wrap my head around.

Man... This is just not *my idea of a good time.*

All the same, if she lost the battle that was to come, things would turn sour fast. It's all well and good to kill the birds that get into your seed stock, but you had to accept the result that the bugs they ate would proliferate in turn.

I had chosen to stay, and that meant I was making a gamble.

Fortunately I had Lottie on my side. If the smoke took too severe a toll on me, I was sure it was well within her power to help me out.

I finally took her pipe from her and eyed its lip, stained a deep, dark red from Nanna's own lips. I wasn't thinking anything as stupid as "My lips are going to

touch the same thing her lips did”—I was merely curious as to what you would have to mix together to create rainbow-colored bubbles.

I plucked up my courage and brought the pipe to my lips. I took a drag and let the smoke fill my mouth. It looked poisonous, but it was sweet on the tongue. After the first honeyed taste, it gave a cinnamon-like kick. I drew it into my lungs, then puffed out. It left a complex flavor, like a perfume or cologne.

I cocked my head in confusion at the lack of any effect when it hit me—my vision started to grow hazy, like a TV on a broken channel.

Enveloped in a rainbow smoke, I could make out...an all too familiar sight. It was that little cave where I spent most of my college days, rolling dice.

It was a twelve-mat room which had once been used by a small business. There was no way that a simple reincarnation would let me forget something this foundational. It was all there—the furniture in its usual place, the broken plasterboard after a friend tripped, the broken light in the back that no one had bothered to fix.

I had chosen this place with my friends for the sole purpose of making my lifelong hobby ever easier, and we would use it even after graduating college, whether it was just for a few drinks together or a full-blown session.

The smell came back to me too—that musky, bittersweet smell of a group of college friends crammed together. The “rug” was a series of foam squares that you could attach to bring it to the desired size; it was as old and worn as ever.

The shelves that lined one wall were full of rulebooks gifted by fellow students or recent graduates. The three low tables were covered in tokens, dice, and playmats.

There were binders in all sorts of colors, filled with various systems and rules, as well as endless character sheets lovingly kept after their campaigns had come to a close. Printouts of various scenarios lay inside, ready to be used by other friends.

What a nostalgic scene this was.

There was a man at the table, reading a book, tapping a pen to his forehead as he leaned on a knee in thought. He was of average height and build, the sort

of guy who you would lose in a crowd. He was a student in that time of his life where he could wear whatever he wanted every day, but he was dressed in a suit. This wasn't because he had any particular affinity for looking smart—it was just because a suit was appropriate for any occasion that might surface in his daily life.

On the table before him was, naturally, some sort of character sheet. From the layout it looked to be for some kind of modern setting, not the usual fantasy fare. The book in his hand—a rulebook—was full of sticky notes. He looked at it as he tapped figures into a calculator.

There was no way I could forget who this man was.

I had seen his face in the mirror on dreary mornings, in the reflection of the company car at work, and in the windows at night. He was the man who was to one day become Erich of Konigstuhl: Fukemachi Saku.

Not one hair on his head had gone gray yet, and it would be some time still before the disease to come left his cheeks sallow—he was a young, healthy college student. This was me during the most happy and easy part of my life.

I was the only one with the key to this place, so I would often come when I was between lectures and ponder my next scheme to make my damage output so wild that my friends and the GM would ask me to run the numbers again.

I walked around the room, seeing all those old things that had brought me such joy. As I touched a rulebook that was particularly special to me—where the creator of the world, a sword, was so hell-bent on getting us to use its creations that it half drove the campaign off the rails all on its own—I heard the sound of a pen being placed down. I turned around.

Saku looked at Erich. He smiled as he rolled two D6s in one hand.

Seriously? You don't use those dice for this game! Even I can remember that.

Oh. Right. So that's my dream.

It wasn't a bad dream. It was a dream that would keep on going whether I was awake or asleep. Whereas you there—once you leave college and get a job, you'll moan about not having time to idly sling dice and chat, about not having the chance to show off the character sheets you scribbled up. And then, waiting

at the end of it all, there would be that bed, that unfamiliar ceiling, the *chemo*... But in some twist of fate, I had been handed a new character sheet. One with a situation that only the kindest GMs I had known would cook up—a new world with no link to my old one, a new life, generated straight from the random tables in the back of the book.

So yes, my daily life was truly like a dream. A dream that I was excited to be living, every step of the way.

I raised my arms, filled with longing and with jolly camaraderie, and presented Erich, myself, before Saku.

So, how about it? From your perspective, is my build satisfactory? Or are you going to tell me I need to respec?

He looked me up and down, then gave a smile. It was the same expression I had made when a friend defeated a difficult boss with laughable figures from a nigh impossible combo. It seemed like my build was worthy and interesting enough to earn my past self's faint praise.

I gave a smirk back—*you're damn right*—when he did something unexpected. He held out the D6s before me: snake eyes. What a foul provocation to make. I clucked my tongue at him and flipped him the bird.

Fukemachi Saku erupted into silent laughter before sending the dice clattering across the table. It was a wonderful sound.

Just as they scattered to a halt, I felt my consciousness being pulled back into the Baldur Clan's visitor room.

"So...how was it?"

"It was a little nostalgic, I'd say."

I handed back her pipe, trying to convey without words that I hoped she was satisfied. The mage took a long drag herself and let out a puff of that wistful smoke around us.

[Tips] Chasing dreams or being chased by dreams—these two things look the same from the outside.

Not even Nanna knew the exact formulae behind the rainbow bubble-inducing smoke that she enjoyed. What she did know was that it had come to her while she was meditating, *praying* even—a decidedly unmagusly pastime—as she contemplated the figurative hell that resided in her mind. Her newest and proudest creation was less an invention and more a veritable *divine revelation*. And yet, and yet, its effects were still far removed from her ambitions.

It drew up and fulfilled every passing fancy and deep-held ideal the imbiber had ever held, casting them into a phantasmagoria tailored to their own mind. Yet at the end of the day, it only sharpened the abject misery of life in the waking world for Nanna.

Its effects would have been more than satisfactory to others. A psychonaut gifted with a measure of calm could find real joy in watching the unattainable images of their past fancies play out in the distance.

“Calm” was not one of Nanna’s assets.

Despite the comforts she enjoyed thanks to her artificial semblance of a Methuselah’s physiology, she despaired at the cloying, unshakable confines of her soul, her nervous system, and the rigid bounds of time itself.

Where could salvation be found? What could she do to ease the pain inside her head? Kierkegaard posited that truth could be found in autonomy. Sartre argued that existence preceded essence. Yet if these philosophers were in her world, could they have possibly saved her?

Though she lacked the formal armature to put it in familiar terms, she knew too well the mortal terror of the condition of absolute freedom put forth in *Being and Nothingness*. If she could simply have embraced the touch of the void, she might not have been so stymied by the question of what “essence” was in the first place.

In all the world’s creation myths, it is said that the gods contributed Their best qualities in creating sentient life. If such were the case, then what could possibly explain the gaping lacuna in her brain? She could try and talk around the black box of her consciousness—map out the negative space with analogies

and hypotheticals—but at the end of the day, she was chasing a mirage in the vain hope there might be water somewhere in it. At once compelled to pursue and achingly aware of the futility of inquiry, who *wouldn't* find their enthusiasm for life ebbing away?

The madwoman, burned and famished by her own dreams, watched the adventurer before her, deep in his private haze. This drug was unique among Nanna's repertory in that it possessed none of the expected habit-forming properties, allowing her to give it a little test run with this unlikely partner.

In the past, many an adventurer had found new depths of misery in the high; their inability to square their real lives with their dearest dreams made manifest caused them agony. Many in turn sought refuge from the pain by venturing deeper, letting the drug strand them in their fantasies for hours at a time with each drag. Uzu and her peers, textbook hard-luck cases to the last, took one puff of the stuff and decided to spend the next two days straight away from reality.

People were incomplete beings, living so far from both truth and ideals. What sort of caring, benevolent pantheon would author a world so rife with suffering, that even within the confines of one's own brain one can stumble into tortures that stretch out to the end of time?

What was she to make of this swordsman, knowing all she knew? Nanna pondered just how long he could bear seeing his own ideals played out inside his head. That said, she was trying not to hang too much on the outcome one way or another. It was just one more baited hook beckoning her deeper into the suffocating horror of the sober world.

After half a minute or so, Goldilocks returned to the waking world. Nanna didn't know how long it had been in his head. He set to fixing his hair. He'd mussed it inadvertently while he'd been away.

"So...how was it?"

It was a miracle that Nanna managed to keep her voice calm. Could someone truly remain untouched by despair as they became a plaything of the world around them? What sort of creature could witness their perfect world and still choose to return so easily? Surely that wasn't allowed. Goldilocks simply

adjusted his posture as if nothing had passed at all. The time he spent in a daze, the ease by which he readjusted to reality—it spoke well enough of his character. The man was *mad*. He was a fool, dreaming even as he worked, rutted, and killed.

"It was a little nostalgic, I'd say."

He sounded so *casual*—if he wasn't mad, Nanna would off herself where she stood. In spite of everything, she clung to the hell she knew among the living rather than risk some worse discovery, some faint chance that she might retain some scrap of *self* on the other side; she could never allow herself to believe in earnest that Erich was sane.

And why shouldn't he have been? Mad folk had thrived in Ende Erde for as long as there had *been* an Ende Erde. Nanna was certain he would prove to be a great asset in ridding her turf of her competition and their poison. In turn, she would put everything she had behind this invincible philosophical zombie that had fallen into her lap—if only for this one project.

[Tips] In worlds where gods exist, philosophy is a dubious weapon to take up in defense of one's psyche.

"I'll kill 'em all myself!" Siegfried knocked over his chair as he stood up, his eyes burning with rage.

I wasn't all too surprised that he was this mad. After all, I had just told him that our home was on the cusp of being consumed by the drug trade.

It was the day after I had received Nanna's "house call." I spared my friends the unnecessary details as I passed Nanna's intel along. Their reactions were all the same—fury at the crooks flooding Ende Erde with illicit junk.

I had brought back a small sample of Kykeon, and Kaya had dabbed a tiny amount to her tongue before she spat it out—one taste was plenty for the heir to a long line of distinguished herbalists like her to get the picture. "What a loathsome piece of work," she said, her words dripping venom.

"It's a potent cerebral stimulant—*much* too potent," she went on. "There are

mushrooms with some medical value that operate along similar channels, but you know how it is—the dose makes the poison. This garbage will eat holes in your brain just slowly enough to ensure your dealer still gets to squeeze all the profit they can from your creeping dependency on and habituation to it. Whoever made this, I don't want to know what they were thinking."

Kaya's explanation was icy calm. Her test run confirmed that this wasn't just a passing paranoid fancy of Nanna's.

"So? Where're they makin' the stuff?" Siegfried returned to the matter at hand, still visibly angry.

"Cool it, Sieg. It's not that easy."

"Beg *pardon?*"

I felt bad—his anger came from a righteous place—but the time for action was still a while off.

"You said it isn't yet clear who's manufacturing it," said Margit.

"That's part of it, yeah. The bigger problem is that it's not *technically* illegal."

"You're shittin' me."

Even though this drug plainly caused nothing but harm, medical legislation moved slowly, and so neither usage nor possession of Kykeon, let alone dealing, was illegal within the eyes of the Empire. The issue was that even though they could make the actual substance illegal, they couldn't ban the catalysts that triggered the effects. This loophole was most likely a holdover from some College iatrurge who had loosened the laws to help treat a noble in the throes of agony on their deathbed. The result was that brand-new drugs didn't fall under the remit of the law.

It was kind of a similar phenomenon to the hoops involved with legislating against synthetic cannabinoids in my old world. At any rate, the big picture was that loopholes like this were part of the cost of having any kind of functional health-care system—you could hardly issue a blanket ban on the same goods herbalists and doctors used day in, day out.

Nanna had promised me that she would engage in talks with Marsheim's

nobles to make it illegal as soon as possible, but it was going to be an uphill battle. This stuff was ten assarii a tab—cheaper than Elefsina's Eye—and so it wasn't seeing much traffic in middle class circles and above. In other words, it was hard to get nobles to care. Most didn't give a rat's ass if the plebeians led themselves into ruin.

So it would take a while for the stuff to be made illegal, and even if that succeeded, the manufacturers would just take another page from the synthetic cannabinoid industry's playbook (however inadvertently—but who knew, maybe the architect of this whole scheme was some bald creep from New Mexico a universe or two over from my old one who'd been cut the same break I had) and mix up the chemical composition *just* a bit to slip through the cracks. We needed to bring our best game plan to avoid playing Narco Whac-A-Mole.

"It means we can't eliminate them yet," I said. "First of all, even if we rounded up all the dealers, they're at the fringes of the operation. It'll only make our enemy more wary."

"So you're sayin' do nothin'?!" said Siegfried.

"No, I'm not. The dealers are most likely repeat offenders or crooks looking for a cheap gig. If you bump into one, don't hesitate to do some *questioning*."

"But...even if you shake a tree of all its leaves, it won't die," input Margit.

"Yeah. The whole thing needs to come up *root and branch*."

It was just as she said, the clever little minx—dealers were at the tail end of the food chain. Who knows how many times they were outsourced; we could be looking at a chain of distribution five or six layers deep.

Even if we shook a few leaves off and torture—*ahem*, interviewed them, all we would get is the name of the small-time crook playing middle manager who'd roped them in, not the big cheese lurking in the shadows. It would be even worse if we pushed too hard and ended up being fed bogus info.

"What we need is the strength and influence to win this," I said.

"Influence? You...ain't talkin' about rank, are you?"

"Right on. We need to expand our influence throughout Marsheim as a

whole.”

“Whoa, whoa, wait a sec. You’re sayin’ you want to start a *clan*?”

Siegfried must have put two and two together from watching me recently—he was on the money. I was glad to see it wouldn’t take too much coaxing to get him up to speed. Befriending Sieg felt like one of the luckiest breaks I’d caught in ages.

“Not in the way you think. I won’t take a cut of people’s pay. I won’t charge an entry fee. What I *will* do is create a collective of adventurers to whom I can assign jobs through a mediator and from whom I can gather information.”

“Uh, sounds like a clan to me...”

“Yeah, but it’s important to note that the structure’s going to be different. I just want talented folks who *want* to be part of what we have. That means I want to focus on helping us grow, not on profit.”

It was as Nanna said—it was likely that people considered us four and the four disciples under me a proper clan now. It was fine for a cat to pretend to be a tiger, but the opposite invited nothing but trouble. The solution? Play the role of the tiger to the hilt and convince folks that we had a generous minimum safe distance.

It was true that taking and raising up disciples wasn’t your usual TRPG fare, but I was a flesh-and-blood adventurer; it wasn’t too far from what I considered an adventurer’s life. I needed to strike the occasional bargain between my ideals and reality to make a living. Not only that, Mister Fidelio had taken the time to teach me. It made sense to pass that good along.

“Although I’m going to be fair—not too strict, but ready to give praise where it’s due. They won’t be paying me in money, but in terms of keeping up our rep.”

“Sounds pretty tough if you ask me. Won’t we get a bunch who call it quits?”

“Pretty much guaranteed, but it’s a screening process. We don’t want people who want to borrow our name in an effort to play big man on campus.”

“Yeah, that kinda crap’s for a story’s minor roles,” Siegfried said. He crossed

his arms and leaned back in his chair to stare at the ceiling.

Siegfried's own heroic idol was known for his solitude—refusing to become anyone's master or teach anything. I expected that my comrade was a bit conflicted between wanting to emulate his hero and joining in on teaching rookies.

"It sucks, man... I wish Siegfried left behind his own teachings... Then I coulda joined the school that taught his sword style..."

There was no joy waiting at the end of this train of thought. There were many things in our world that bore Siegfried's name, but his swordplay was not one of them. It was only natural, considering he never once led a party and never took on a single student.

"Yeah, good luck with that," I said. "I don't think I've ever heard a version of the Siegfried lore where he was super keen on *sharing*."

There were a few schools across the Empire that taught sword styles that could be traced back to heroes from the Age of Gods. Some only took on the name for clout, but there were some which could genuinely trace their roots to living legends from thousands of years in the past.

Unfortunately, Sigurd, the famed hero who slew Fafnir, only really left his story for future generations. Even his legendary sword, Windslaught, was said to have been lost in the waters that swallowed him. Other retellings veered off in other directions, but Sigurd's love was only ever for divine beings, and he had no offspring. His jaw-dropping martial might, which had let him fell a *true* dragon and ancestor of drakes with nothing but straight up *muscle power*—was lost to the annals of time.

Mostly you could chalk it up to his tragically early death; the world lost out on a lot that day. Even in the heavily reworked retellings, Siegfried's sword style was an inextricable feature. Willfully suppressing such benign traditions was a crime against future generations.

"If it did exist, I'd totally have signed up," Siegfried went on. "Then, if I found Windslaught after learning all his skills, I'd be in the kind of stories *nobody* forgets, ever!"

“You think normal people could learn it? We’re talking about a guy who went toe-to-toe with a literal dragon with nothing but his muscles keeping him going. Seems to me that it’s asking for stuff a regular old person couldn’t do.”

“There’s *one* sword style from the Age of the Gods that folks figured out how to adapt for mortals, isn’t there? I always thought the founder’s sagas were real damn annoying, so it’s not like I’m gonna try picking it up, but still—you know what I mean? It’s that super uncool one that uses a thin sword...”

“Oh yeah... Uh, Camy... Camyu...”

“Camulo Agrippa Style. I mean, can you even do any damage with that style?”

As Siegfried said the name it began to ring some bells. There was a hero from the Age of Gods named Camulo who wielded a mighty sword that was lauded as the Bridge Toppler. It was a hefty thing, the same length as a longsword but with three times the heft of a hatchet. Camulo wielded it using his own unique sword style too.

Just by the weight of the weapon alone, this style was beyond any regular person’s ability to even imitate. However, there was a school that carried on the techniques, reenvisioned for use with rapiers. The result was that Camulo’s style—it was easy to view it as one of those “smash first, ask questions later” styles for meatheads—had taken on sophisticated and elegant trappings. Certain nobles kept the practice alive in the present day.

“Yeah, it’s a style that wouldn’t shine on the battlefield. I saw it in Berylin. You need to be a real pro to stab into your opponent’s unarmored spots. Only the most skilled practitioners could put it to work in a practical setting.”

The style was full of techniques your average person couldn’t do, so as it was passed down, it lost something of its original power. No one had truly mastered the style since Camulo’s five personal disciples.

For someone who used hybrid sword arts, where every part of your body was a weapon—even treating your weapon and shield as disposable if need be—it just seemed like too much flash for too little bang. I was sure that truly honing the way of the sword could lead you to greater heights than my hybrid sword arts, but I just wasn’t sold on the efficiency of that investment.

“To be fair,” I went on, “my sword skills aren’t all that ‘honorable,’ if you get me. I don’t mind teaching, but it won’t win any awards for *panache*. It’s a mercenary’s way of fighting.”

“Ahh, yeah. You have zero hesitation when it comes to smashing a guy’s face with your sword pommel or kicking him in the shins...or grabbing him and throwing him on the ground before impalin’ him... Yeah, that’s not really anyone’s idea of a traditional ‘school.’”

Now, far be it from me to claim that I was rocking the Conan *look*, much as I wanted to, but my sword style was a hundred-percent *barbaric*. It was conceived with the understanding that the point of violence was making sure the right people were turned into corpses with the least amount of fuss.

“Seems we’ve gone a bit off track. I was thinking I could teach the sword and you could teach the spear. Then we could cover the basics of long-distance expeditions and raise them up into a decent little unit.”

“Yes, a little expedition seems like a good idea,” Margit said. I gave her a little smile-and-nod action.

Our party had suffered in the cursed cedar ichor maze last winter in no small part because our supply lines were compromised and we’d not done enough to prepare emergency rations. A larger group needed more consumables; we would need a carriage if we were to go on any longer excursions.

There was a huge benefit to this larger setup, though: *increased coverage*. Cooking and lookout duties split between only four made even the simplest trip exhausting. However, if we were able to split lookout into three shifts, it would do wonders for our stamina.

With more people fit to move out on command, we could leap straight into the fray basically as soon as we knew what we were doing.

Saint Fidelio’s party hewed to the opposite model. With only the four of them, they had to be *extremely* thorough and meticulous about prep, meaning they only managed about one adventure every season. Even if they received a call from a nearby canton for aid, it would take them three days to muster properly before they could even set off.

When you considered this whole angle, suddenly founding a clan didn't seem like a recipe for hauling around a bunch of dead weight. This way we could preserve our strength and tackle the endgame of any adventure at peak performance.

Of course, I was plenty aware that Nanna hadn't recommended we start our own clan purely out of the goodness of her heart. She had everything to gain from her favorite source of plausibly deniable muscle turning out stronger and more flexible. If I didn't go about the whole process *properly*, I'd risk losing the upper hand in our relationship to her.

"Hmm... Right, then. Why wait? Let's get to it," said Siegfried. "But won't we need a name?"

I was stunned for a moment—since when did *Siegfried* roll that well on an Insight check? I had applied a bit of Persuasion to bring the gang around; I hadn't been prepared to have the tables turned on me by such an obvious question. As was my eternal flaw, I just wasn't the most creative guy.

"We could use someone's name," I said. "I know! How about Clan Siegfried?"

"H-Hold it, why me?! No way! Why not you?!"

"Clan Erich? Sounds a bit dumb to me... I've got quite the common name."

"Now that you mention it," said Kaya, "we don't really have all that much in common thematically."

"Agreed," Margit said with a sigh.

Your average adventurer needed to be as much a salesperson for their own skills as much as anything else. If we couldn't pin down something as simple as our *brand identity*, we'd never pin down a good moniker.

It was a surprisingly difficult task to find a memorable, relatable, meaningful name. It would be totally easy if we were a store dealing in physical goods. We could riff on whatever it was we were selling. But adventurers dealt in somewhat more mercurial goods. Some clans used their biggest figure, like Clan Laurentius. Others used the founding member's family name, such as the Baldur Clan or the Heilbronn Familie. These were the usual methods. The Exilrat—a bit of a highfalutin term shared between Old Rhinian and a couple of

neighboring languages, translating to something like “the coalition of vagabonds”—was bit of a showy choice, meant to reflect how their large numbers had found one another, despite being strangers to each other and their adoptive nation. We were only a small group of eight at the moment—something that overblown would make us look like assholes.

“I-I shall report to you all should I come up with something!” I said hurriedly.

“You’re kickin’ the can down the road, buddy...”

“Go on then, Sieg! Why don’t *you* come up with something cool, catchy, and meaningful! Go ahead! You’ve got ten seconds!”

“Huh?! Uhh, you suggested the clan! That means it’s *your* responsibility to sort out a name! Them’s the rules, right?”

Ugh, but all my ideas suck... I had come up with a few possible candidates, but each and every one sent me back to my middle school years—when what we thought was cool was anything but. I trashed every idea and purged them from my memory. I would think about it later. I mean, I was already part of the Trialist Empire of Rhine’s Department of Lost Writing Retrieval—I did *not* want to add more fuel to leave future generations with the impression that I was some edgelord punk too big for his britches. My spirit wouldn’t be able to rest if I went down in the history books as the scholarly community’s favorite punching bag—labeled an agent of a treasonous cabal bent on world domination, suspected of hoarding lost relics... I’d end up finding myself in the pages of some conspiracy theorist’s writings instead of the sagas I dreamed of!

It was quite the big ask, and none of us could come up with something decent, so we put the issue of a name on the back burner...

[Tips] Deciding on a group’s name shouldn’t be taken lightly. It can affect how a scenario is replayed and might even invite jokes that are more cruel than funny.

Real experience was the only way to improve skills that would be used in the field. On the other hand, you can’t count on a bunch of greenhorns not to injure themselves if you push them to try more difficult techniques, even with practice

swords. Naturally, one of the most common solutions to this dilemma was *demonstration*. Especially in full-contact arts like swordplay, you can't overstate the instructional value of "monkey see, monkey do." A great dancer, a great singer, and a great killer all owed a debt to the people who modeled the form for them.

"I'm ready anytime," said Goldilocks.

"You bet," replied Siegfried.

The two adventurers stood facing one another in the yard of the Snowy Silverwolf; a small crowd of four had gathered to watch and learn.

Erich stood straight on with his wooden sword held up at shoulder height. Siegfried was standing with his left shoulder forward, his wooden sword poised ready to go.

Erich's stance was known as "vom Tach;" it was the basic form for the Empire's standard style, designed to receive incoming enemies. Erich favored lower stances, but was happy to take up this slightly higher stance for educational purposes. It was part of the fundamentals, and as such, fatal to ignore. There'd be nothing to gain at this phase from teaching anything too technical with recruits this raw anyway. Erich's usual style looked superficially like it left him open all over, but it was only thanks to his honed techniques and parallel trains of thought that he could manifest it. If a rookie with only the barest grasp of the basics tried to copy it, all those *superficial* openings would translate into *actual* openings.

Siegfried, on the other hand, had taken up the Zornhut stance—the natural pose of any old fool you could grab off the street and foist a long weapon upon in a mad rush to repel an invasion. The stance used the whole upper body, twisting it out of shape and into a brutal windup—almost like a baseball batter's swing from Erich's old world. This stance allowed you to put a lot of oomph behind one big blow at a time. It was suited for quick lunges.

If he was in the right stance and timed his slash with his step well, he could easily cut through someone's armor right to the skin. However, the sword's rest position was behind his back—although it looked like it was suited for a mad offensive, it also allowed one to *repel* a blow as much as dish one out. The blade

could receive simple swings from the front; if the opponent stepped forward to attack, the sword could be swung around from the side to deliver a hefty counter.

“Yaaah!”

Siegfried was playing the role of attacker. He leaped forward. His slash and battle cry were filled with so much vigor that it was easy to forget this was being done for instructional purposes. A hint of bloodlust came through in the slash.

Erich, on the other hand, didn’t tend to reinforce his slashes with a battle cry. This time, too, he received Siegfried’s attack without a sound. The two swords clashed—if they’d had metal blades, the pair would be locked in a press, but these wooden swords merely clacked together. But this was only for demonstration—it was more than enough to show them how Erich accepted the blow.

A moment after the swords met, Erich drew his sword close to his body to destabilize Siegfried’s stance. He then stepped forward and used that momentum to twist his sword round in a half circle. Using this leverage to step behind Siegfried, he dropped his sword before clasping the hilt of Siegfried’s own sword with his left hand and the “blade” with his right.

“Ngh!”

Even in a serious fight, a sword was only of any use if one had the momentum to move it. This was especially true if you were wearing gauntlets. Erich had grabbed Siegfried’s sword and caught him in a pin from behind. He kicked the backs of Siegfried’s knees and simultaneously drew the sword down toward Siegfried’s neck.

It was an agile and effective tactic—one that none of the onlookers would have concocted themselves. It seemed unthinkable for a swordsman to drop his sword to close out the bout with his empty hands. It was particularly useful if your sword was worn down by battle or dulled by blood and grime. Against someone who relied on their sword more than their physical prowess, you could cut their throat before they knew what hit them.

Here, then, was the most elemental form of murder by hybrid sword arts.

“Tch...”

Siegfried gave a loud tut as he smacked Erich’s elbow to indicate the demonstration was over. Erich knew that Siegfried was on the attacking side, but he thought his comrade might have moved a little too quickly. He let his friend go, thinking it might have been better for their disciples if he went a bit slower and telegraphed his moves more clearly.

“This is a useful technique if your opponent is using a longsword. My old master called it the ‘neck cutter.’ It can be used with whatever kind of armor you’re wearing—or *not* wearing, as the case may be. Surrendering your sword in the heat of battle shakes up the established terms of the fight; if your enemy’s gotten comfortable fighting blade-to-blade, you can break their focus, throw off all their predictions, and scare the hell out of them,” Erich explained.

It would be no good to show and not tell. His disciples were starting to get the basics down, so Erich needed to explain the deeper theory behind his “anything goes” swordplay before he threw them into a proper fray.

“In this case, would I have been at a better advantage if I’d let go of my sword after striking yours?” asked Siegfried.

“Yeah, one way out—if this happens to you—is to drop your sword before they get behind you. Or if they do grab your sword, you could get your gauntlets up to protect your neck before falling backward; then you just let gravity do the work to ground your foe and knock the wind out of them.”

“Huh. So if your foe’s real keen on doin’ this neck-cutter thing to the T, you could grab your dagger and stab at their kneecaps or something?”

“Exactly. You can always counter a move—don’t forget that. Even if it *looks* like magic from the outside, in your own head, you’re constantly weighing predictions and taking calculated risks.”

The pair worked through a few more sets, punctuated with more verbal breakdowns and play-by-plays. Erich had chosen to make Siegfried the attacker because that was the role less at risk of getting injured. All Siegfried had to do was move his sword and body as Erich ordered.

Siegfried had learned the principles of mounting a defense and the requisite

tax upon one's reserves of courage from a number of real-life battles. However, every time he saw his head fly off in these demonstrations—where in real life it would be far too late to take notes—he couldn't help but grow despondent at his relative incompetence. A fleeting moment made all the difference in battle. One death was plenty to ensure you'd never learn from the experience.

"We go into battle with the blade beside us. We serve it as it serves us, but you should never grow overly attached to it," said Erich. "In a battle where you have to swap between the offensive and defensive at blinding speeds, it can take real courage to know when to drop your weapon. I want you to remember that."

As Erich warned that mistakes were only permitted in practice, Siegfried felt that his comrade was so, so far from him. No matter how many times they crossed blades, he felt like he would never win. He wasn't so proud or foolish to deny the overwhelming sense of a foregone conclusion, even as it frustrated him.

"Gods dammit..." he muttered.

Siegfried was still so distant from his namesake that he aspired toward. That legend whose lone sword and mighty stature swept away everything in his path—it seemed like such a faraway goal.

"Now then, Siegfried. For this next one, mind swapping to a spear?"

"Huh? Oh, right."

Next in the itinerary was combat against polearms. As requested, Siegfried fetched a wooden training spear. It was an infantry-standard length, and had been left in the Snowy Silverwolf yard for rookies to practice with. It must have seen a lot of use; it was a bit battered, but all the same, it felt good in Siegfried's hands.

The hero-hopeful gave it a few practice spins to warm up and then struck it on the ground, using the recoil to set it spinning the other way. Siegfried sent it twirling round under his armpit and set it ready for the practice—the movement came so naturally that it seemed as if the weapon could do no harm.

"Whoa..."

A chorus of amazed voices rose from the rookies after Siegfried's little demonstration. Siegfried was merely warming up his muscles to ready them for the difference in how a spear handled. He couldn't see what was so impressive about it. The movements were just an extension of the kind you used with a spade or an axe. It was easier than a sword, in the sense that you simply needed to not mess up the placement of the point or get the balance wrong.

In all honesty, Siegfried was resentful that he *could* use it with more ease than the sword. He didn't want to make light of the weapon—it was far more useful when working with a unit, and his greatest feats so far had been achieved with the spear. The biggest purchase he'd ever made for himself had been his prized spear. He admitted he had an affinity for it, but something wouldn't let him choke down how at odds it was with the dreams he had held since he was younger.

Siegfried had left Illfurth with the dream of becoming not just a hero, but a legendary swordsman. A spear was a strong, practical choice, but it just didn't carry the *romance* of a sword in his private little world. It was a silly emotion, but to the young lad, the sword was just so much *cooler* than the spear.

Others would probably remark that he was being childish and sentimental, but such emotions were necessary if your occupation risked your very life. The difference in morale it could make could seal your fate, for better or for worse.

"We're going off script with this one," said Erich. "I want you to show them some basic moves with your spear. Show them how it puts you at the advantage."

"Sure, got it. Don't hurt yourself now."

The pair didn't need any clear signal—after seeing Erich take on his usual posture, holding his sword in his shadow, Siegfried charged with all his might. It was a simple stance—his right hand gripped the spear and his left took up a position further down the shaft to help guide it.

Siegfried made some quick jabs as he twisted the spear's end in a feint. In battle, it never made sense to simply rely on one quick strike to the heart off the bat. Goldilocks had taught him to make small jabs at the enemy's feet to maintain the ideal distance.

“Oof...” said Erich as he hopped backward.

Siegfried wondered if Erich had purposefully acted badly here to show the disciples the *wrong* thing to do—he was moving directly backward, as if fleeing from the spear strikes. Erich moved swiftly back from these shallow jabs, still fleeing as Siegfried stabbed at various other places—the knees, the torso, weak points in the joints of his armor.

The hero-hopeful didn’t make any sweeping blows. Faced with someone as tough as Goldilocks, they would strike in retaliation and make use of the spear’s momentum to knock it out of the way. In a one-on-one bout, bold movements were unsafe.

If it was a battle between two spear wielders, it would call for a more varied approach from both as they jockeyed for position—even the weight of their gauntlets could be used to the attacker’s advantage—but fighting against a close-quarters sword fighter, the best strategy was to simply bar their approach.

One or two strikes was enough to snuff your opponent’s life out, or at least slow them down. Siegfried could do a flashy arcing swing and knock Erich off his feet, but this was a practice bout, so he stuck to orthodox moves that wouldn’t garner much applause.

“Oops!” Erich had been pushed against the wall of the yard under Siegfried’s steady assault. “Get the picture? If you’re scared of what’s in front of you, then you can run out of places to run. One more step from Siegfried and the gap’s closed.”

“Yeah, but only chickens would be scared of constant pokes like that. If you’re me, look, one stab to the heart and it’s all over.”

“Exactly. Which is why you need to do this...”

Goldilocks changed his stance in the next moment; Siegfried reacted quickly, letting out a quick stab himself. Erich had chosen the half-sword stance, clasping the middle of the “blade” in his left gauntlet. This was a stance reserved for only the closest of close quarters.

Siegfried’s spear deflected off of Erich’s sword, his strike arriving where

Erich's head had been a moment earlier.

Siegfried clucked his tongue. It was hard to pull off a swipe if he didn't have the momentum to start it up. This went double when trying to deal with the half-sword stance—a stance designed to deal with the spear. Unless you had some real muscles behind you, you would be knocked down by the sword's quick movements.

Now that they were in close quarters, the spear put Siegfried at a great disadvantage. He chose defense over offense. He reversed the grip of his right hand to hold the spear in a protective posture. He watched Erich's sword close in, pushed back, and despite his uneasy footing, kicked with his right foot.

He was aiming for the stomach. Armor would prevent a simple kick from doing any damage, but it was a good place to strike if you meant to knock a foe off-balance. But Goldilocks saw it coming. He shifted his arm, blocking the kick with his elbow. Now off-balance and still at risk of catching a sword blow, Siegfried dropped his spear and rolled forward to distance himself from Erich.

"I thought I had you with that," said Erich. "I must say, you are a real pain to deal with as a sword fighter."

"That meant to be a compliment?"

Siegfried had done a few rolls to open the gap as much as he could in the shortest amount of time, but as he stood up he realized he didn't have a weapon hanging off his waist—the wooden sword didn't use a scabbard.

"Well, yeah. You deflect all my hits. You keep me in check when I think I've cinched it. You've got good eyes, don't you think?"

"Seriously? It's mostly just instinct... When my gut tells me it's gonna be bad, I stop. When I feel like I can push, I push. That's it."

The hero-hopeful had learned the basic movements, but everything on top of it was essentially pure instinct. He could sense the precise direction and intention of his foe's bloodlust in the air; he felt the hairs rise on the back of his neck when things seemed dire. It was this visceral reaction that had saved his life during Jonas Baltlinden's onslaught and the battles in the ichor maze. It wasn't something he could really explain with words, so he felt no need to hide

it.

“If I hadn’t gotten out of the way, you would’ve toppled me and we would’ve gotten into a scuffle. Spear won’t help you there, so I dropped it.”

“And you were going to continue the fight with your spare equipment, I see.”

Erich flexed his neck as he stood in awe of Siegfried’s amazing instinct—or perhaps what could be described as his good luck. It was true he wasn’t going all out, but his sword skills were still Divine level—he was amazed that the world was such a big place that there were people who could spar with him based on gut feeling alone. It also reaffirmed how much real luck could affect whether you could get those critical hits out and how different it could be from person to person.

In a similar way to how snake eyes could enfeeble even the highest-level adventurer, so too could boxcars unleash amazing strength. It was true that some of the best could cinch a miraculous critical hit at the climax of a campaign, but to think someone could so reliably get them out in a practice session like this!

Even with the power granted by the future Buddha to see through to the hidden data of this world, it seemed that things within it could overturn even these values.

“Hmm... Standard practice is to lower that critical rate or give him more dice to play with...”

“You say something?”

“Nothing. Just some idle grumbling.”

Goldilocks gave a bitter smile as he kicked Siegfried’s spear up into his hand before tossing it over to his partner. He turned to the group of starry-eyed rookies behind him—in awe that they got to see such an amazing bout, of a kind that they had only known in a form perpetually abridged and muddled, never laid out plain, in the heroic tales that had drawn them to the adventuring life.

“Now then, I hope you’re all ready to learn *firsthand* just how important it is to keep your distance from a spear. I’ll go lightly with my strikes,” said Erich.

The rookies all froze in fear. Erich grabbed the other training spear and warmed up; he was plenty ready to use it in training, even if the sword suited him better.

"'Learn how scary it is through pain' is your method, huh?" said Siegfried. "Man, you are seriously gonna get stabbed in the back one of these days."

"If that's enough to kill you, it means you didn't put enough work in. That goes for me too, obviously."

Erich spurred the disciples to grab their weapons. Their two trainers were skilled. Neither had a bruise on them. With such a talented set of trainers and so many strapping members of the group, they would be safe from any real injury.

"Make sure you don't break any bones, Siegfried."

"Yeah, yeah, course. Though I bet this bloody spear's gonna snap if I hit Etan or Mathieu with any real force."

But, unfortunately, there was no painless way to learn these lessons. Any belief that they had learned the fundamentals during the demonstration would be worn down through real and painful sparring. The battlefield was complex and worked in three dimensions—nothing was quicker than baptism in the flame of their seniors' experience. The rookies prayed that they would improve quickly as Goldilocks Erich put on an evil smile, ready to lead his disciples straight into hell.

[Tips] Experience from a life-or-death battle engraves itself on your heart and can boost your skills and reflexes.

Not once in my life have I managed to start or close out a major chapter of my life without the weather deciding to piss all over my parade. My big trip home from Berylin was baptized in a brutal downpour. The day after I registered as an adventurer, Marsheim got hammered just the same. Sure, the capital was wetter and more temperamental than anywhere else I'd lived before, but after today, well—"twice is a coincidence; three times is a pattern." Somebody out there just *loves* to put a damper on my big days.

“Hmm...” I said, “I think someone’s bad luck is rubbing off on the group.”

“Uh, it’s totally you, man,” said Siegfried.

Clad in the biggest rain cloak I owned, I stood outside the Snowy Winterwolf with Sieg, who was similarly outfitted.

“Ouch.”

“For real though, remember what happened during our job in Zeufar? The one that was sent to *you*? You’re the unluckiest guy in the group. Face it.”

“Seriously?”

I looked around to Kaya and Margit, hoping they would give me their full-blown support, but they awkwardly avoided my gaze.

“I hate to admit it, but I have to agree with him, Erich,” said Margit. “Do you remember how many times we were attacked on our journey to Marsheim? I think we should be grateful it’s raining water and not arrows.”

“Ha...ha ha... I have nothing really to add on top of that,” said Kaya.

Traitors, the lot of them...

“But it sucks... I wanted a fun send-off for our new carriage,” I said, pouting and letting my shoulders slump in despondence before I could catch myself. It hurt seeing my new two-horse carriage get soaked ahead of its first outing. Couldn’t at least one of them lie for the sake of my suffering mental health?

My Dioscuri were rigged up in front of a covered wagon of the usual make you saw in the Empire. I had specified some tweaks here and there and had it fitted with a steel frame to ease up on the suspension and improve its long-term survivability—it was a real beauty. Although it looked the same as any old carriage from the outside, it was nothing like the cheap things I’d ridden in my time working the caravans. Those glorified apple carts left the average thrifty commoner, to cite the slang of the age, “viciously bumbasted”—sore of ass in a fearsome way; this baby, by contrast, was fit for noble rears. We were set to ride easy.

“Man, I gotta say, you really splashed out. How much did you say it was—ten drachmae?”

“It’s an investment with huge returns once you think about how much better it’ll handle on long excursions. We’ll be able to pitch tents without getting soaked and carry bread with us without it getting soggy. Also, think about your back! You were complaining the whole way back from Zeufar about how heavy your knapsack was.”

I’d dropped a veritable fortune on this in the name of adventure. The price might have amounted to *two* years’ worth of my old home’s earnings, but the value was worth every coin. We could load up everyday supplies that we wouldn’t need immediately, sparing ourselves the back pain and keeping our stamina up. Now that we had a guaranteed means of transport, our choice of gigs was blown wide open.

“Um...”

“Yes, Mathieu?”

The young adventurers we’d recruited had shown up on time and fully prepared. The werewolf, Mathieu, had called out to me with his hand raised. He had only been out in the rain for a short while, but the downpour had left his fur slicked down. When his coat was dry and rippling, he cut a striking, gallant figure, but now he reminded me of a dog caught out in the rain. I fought to keep my mien sober and respectful.

“Are we really gonna go out in this weather? On, uh, a long-distance training expedition?”

“Of course we are,” I said. I could tell that everyone else was silently grumbling at the choice to head out in such inclement weather. “Look,” I said as I threw something over at Mathieu. “Sorry to break it to you, but I was lying when I said this was training. That bag I just threw you? That’s a dowry. It’s jammed full of diamond-studded mystarille rings—no expense spared, every jewel immaculately formed and cut. Every single one’s been loaded up with custom strength-boosting enchantments by thirty College magia. Practically and aesthetically speaking, that package borders on priceless.”

“Wha—?!”

“We need to set out today to deliver them or we’ll miss the wedding. The father of the bride got in a huge fight with a baroness just to get hold of them,

so the bride definitely wants them on time. We've got a good rep for tricky jobs, so they tapped us specifically."

I was lying when I said I was lying—the bag was full of coins, worth about fifty assarii all together. Not worthless, but not a big deal if it got stolen.

"It will take four days to reach our destination by horse—and that's riding hell-for-leather. I left us a little wiggle room in our itinerary, but with all this rain, that's pretty much hosed. But if you're worried about getting a little wet, then, sure, we can delay our journey."

"Huh?! N-No, I..."

Mathieu fumbled with the bag in a complete fluster. I gave him a smile and took it out of his hands.

"Calm down, I'm just posing a what-if scenario. It's just loose change."

Look at them, I thought, *all cute and flustered! These newbies sure are sweet in their naivety...but Siegfried, why do* you *look surprised?!*

"C'mon man," Sieg said, reading my expression. "It's *you*. I wouldn't be surprised if you actually did get a request like that outta the blue."

"If we were heading out for anything that important I'd tell you!"

Sieg, please don't give me that look! I can't stand you being this *disappointed in me twice in one day! Just how little do these people trust me?!*

"Hah, as if. I bet if someone came to you late last night with an awesome adventure, you wouldn't hesitate to drop real hell on us in moments! I bet you'd say it was 'for the good of the group' or some crap."

"Urk... Well... I dunno..."

"Now you're doubtin' yourself?! Quit pussyfootin', dammit!"

Ngh... Got me there, bud. You know me better than I give you credit for...

He was right—if a request like the one I'd made up had come to us, I probably would have said yes. How could I turn down such a tantalizing challenge and such huge potential gains for the party? I was fully aware that it was poor form to play the "always better to ask forgiveness than permission" card so often,

but the allure of adventure could be too strong sometimes.

"I bet if the reward was two hundred drachmae per person," Siegfried went on, "you wouldn't hesitate to drag us straight to hell!"

I could only let out a pathetic squeak at his verbal crit.

"See! I was totally right!"

Margit shook her head in exasperation at the little comedy show Siegfried and I were embroiled in before leaping up into the carriage. It seemed the eldest member of our party was too mature for two boys' childish games. I cleared my throat loudly in hopes it'd clear the air; the air, undeterred, remained full of rain.

"In any case, while I did *indeed* indulge in a little white lie, my point is that I could very well have meant it. We're adventurers! It's in the nature of the work that we don't know what our clients will drop in our laps."

"Oh yeah," said Siegfried. "When we went to Zeufar, the client said they wanted us to sort things out before winter was done."

"Exactly. When you're a lower rank, you'll get less leeway in your gigs. Whether it's raining or hailing, if you've agreed to a job, you've gotta beat feet!"

Of course, I didn't want their first real fight and request to come like a bolt from the blue, so I'd cooked up this little excursion to get them used to what a life of adventuring would entail. None of them had traveled further than the distance from their homes to Marsheim, so it was important to get them used to some off-road orienteering.

"This time I'm completely serious. You can leave your gear in the carriage, but I want *all of you* to walk. We'll be covering a minimum of forty kilometers a day, so get prepared."

"Forty?!"

Every single rookie—and Siegfried, again—cried out in surprise.

Unlike your modern-day sedentary Japanese person, we were pretty used to walking everywhere. In this world, every other form of transportation was

costly—it wasn't like my old world, where you could buy a bicycle by saving up enough pocket money. Walking was crucial, vital, inextricable. Due to this, a thirty-kilometer march wasn't so bad if you were going along well-maintained roads. After all, we weren't unfit desk jockeys. My disciples were trained young men. If they were going to complain about the distance then I evidently hadn't been training them hard enough.

The problem was not in the distance, but our occupation. Adventurers carried their armor, their weapons, their tools, and their food. Not only that, but our jobs would take us to distant cantons and towns that weren't connected by roads. If you couldn't get to your destination across rugged terrain without getting lost, then you couldn't become a legendary hero. It sounded like I was being totally unfair, if not positively abusive, but those were the breaks. You couldn't make a trucker out of somebody who panicked every time they had to merge on the highway; you couldn't make an adventurer out of someone who couldn't handle a long, rough hike.

"Ugh... Carrying my sword the whole way? My back hurts just thinking about it..."

Karsten's sword was a normal size by mensch standards, but in his hands, with his goblin stature, it looked like a veritable zweihander. He looked at his sword with the utmost distaste. All the same, it was the one tool he could not leave behind. You couldn't ship it there and pick it up on arrival either—it was the final bastion between you and death.

"And the rain's not lettin' up either... Oh! If I got news that a canton near my home was being preyed on by bandits, I'd head out despite the weather," Martyn said, holding his hand out to check the rain.

"Look who's playin' hero," replied Mathieu.

"Well, yeah? Adventurers fight for justice, duh."

Martyn's expression had clouded over as he pondered the hypothetical situation. He was apparently from a small farming family and had come to Marsheim to make it big as an adventurer so that he could send money back home and earn enough savings to give a good life to the one he'd agreed to marry. I admired his forward thinking—someone who could imagine the

dangers that lay ahead was destined to be a good adventurer.

“But man, I hate rain...”

“Huh, why? I thought werewolves’ fur was pretty water-repellent,” Etan chimed in.

“Yeah, to a limit. Look at me! My handsome mug’s ruined ’cause of it! I’m like a drowned rat out here.”

“Uh-huh...”

“C’mon, you ass! Why d’you gotta be so cold?! I’m gonna skewer you and grill you over an open fire, you thickheaded ox!”

“Ain’t my fault if your damn fur’s the only thing I notice about ya, stupid dog! You look barely any different if ya ask me!”

“At least call me ‘stupid wolf’!”

Most demihumans fared well against the elements, but that didn’t mean they had to *like* it. Mathieu and Etan had started to heat up as their argument gathered steam. I was in no position to weigh in when it came to what made a handsome demihuman—what guarantee did I have that my own tastes would make sense to anyone else, after all—so I was left at a bit of a loss...

“Hey, guys? Cut the chatter. Any longer and Mister John’s gonna give you a lecture.”

...which was why I borrowed the might of the tavern owner. The pair shut up immediately. It was so sudden that I began to wonder if something had happened while I was absent—this reaction wasn’t normal. It must have been more than a minor spat, that was clear. I wasn’t privy to everything that went on in their lives. Ever since they’d become my disciples, these four had formed a little soot-black job-clearing unit, so something must have happened when they were eating together. If they were told off for taking things too far, it was my responsibility to put them in their place when the need arose.

“Now then, everyone. Let’s put our backs into this! Don’t give me that look—this is easier than the real thing. Let’s enjoy our little outing.”

This practice run was a necessary part of the journey toward the real thing.

Let's get this show on the road.

[Tips] Travel is an entirely different beast for an adventurer. A civilian needs an order of magnitude less baggage.

There was a song from *all* the way back home in my first life that you might have heard; it was an upbeat-sounding little ditty about a young ox getting taken to market, and it depressed the hell out of me for reasons I didn't like dwelling on. My second life had left me with a better grasp of the practical side of things—naturally you had to walk your livestock straight to the butcher's if you couldn't refrigerate the meat—but by the gods, did it paint a grim picture. Not that it mattered much to us. Even the basest cut of beef, king of meats, was well beyond any commoner's budget, so we filled our plates with pork or poultry most days.

"Ugh... Again...?" I muttered.

"Put your damn back into it!" Siegfried yelled at me.

We were heading to a nearby canton to buy a pig for cheap, but I just felt so despondent. I wondered if it was because our trip reminded me of the stupid song, or if it was because we had bumped into the most pathetic, half-hearted ambush in the world.

"How many times do I have to do this? Stupid GM, get some new story beats..."

"Gee Em? Stop speakin' in code!"

If I was being honest, I saw the ambush coming from a mile off, so it would be more accurate to call this a purposeful encounter for my disciples' sake.

We were on a wooded road, still firmly on track. The path was well beaten by the locals and wide enough for our carriage; despite four days of uninterrupted rain, the packed earth of the trail held fast. What was the Harvest Goddess thinking? She'd overslept last year, and now this year She had woken up with all the grumbling in the world. The fields would suffer under all this abuse, and so would everyone else in turn from the farmers on up. Maybe She and the God of

Wind and Clouds were having a little marital spat. That was Their business, but I wish we hadn't been caught in the cross fire.

This was just a little excursion out of the city! I hadn't planned around a random hexcrawl encounter like this. All I wanted was to teach the rookies the importance of marching, fetch a pig from a local canton, and show them the basics of preserving the meat. That was it! So why the unwelcome guests? You couldn't coax a guy into smashing open some poor sap's piggy bank for a few measly cents while he's got a fat wallet of his own burning a hole in his pocket—not unless he was some kind of *freak*. I was a different sort of freak, and I craved a classier avenue for the surplus of violence I had banked.

"U-Um, Goldilocks?!" one of the rookies cried out.

"Keep your head inside! Keep that shield up and lure them in closer. Fighting with them at a distance isn't worth the time."

Judging by our enemies' equipment, they were small-time local thugs, not fully-fledged soldiers under the employ of a local strongman. These folks were only moonlighting as highwaymen. They'd jumped at the sight of a plump carriage, but most likely they all put in most of their hours as well-groomed members of society. There were about ten of them, armed with spears and axes. Half were mensch, the other a rabble of various demihumans. They had no formation or sense of cohesion to speak of—just a hastily assembled gang of fools, all tripping over each other for a shot at us. Clearly they had no military training to speak of.

There was a group of fifteen behind them armed with hunting bows, old-fashioned crossbows that they must have pilfered from somewhere, and slings. This rearguard group were trying to bog us down with suppressing fire—they must have had some people with hunting experience, because they'd mounted their attack from the trees, and their aim wasn't all *that* bad.

All the same, Margit had informed us of their presence before we were even close, leaving them nothing more than a brief bump in the road.

I was standing in front of the carriage and my precious horses, trying to aggro the whole gang while Siegfried and the others had formed a small unit to receive the incoming fire. I was a bit puzzled by our foes. Our side were clad in

armor—some of the rookies had some secondhand stuff—and were obviously ready for battle with their weapons in hand, but the enemy were just coming in guns blazing and heads empty. Couldn't they have seen this was a fight they couldn't win? Shouldn't they have just lain low and waited for easier prey to come walking by?

"Ugh, this is boring... They're nothing better than mindless rabble..."

"C'mon, man!" Siegfried yelled. "This isn't training!"

"Yeah, yeah, I'm drawing their attention... Although their aim is making this harder than it should be. Hey! You scrubs! If you dare hurt my horses, I'll have your guts for garters!"

They had chosen a bad place for an ambush, they didn't have the brains to realize we were a bad target, and they didn't even work that well as a team. There was nothing here to get my blood pumping. There would be no glory from this battle—maybe enough small change to get a second pig.

"Wagh! My shield was hit!" another cry from my team came out.

"Cool it! Keep marching! If you turn around, you'll get an arrow in the back! It's safer to press onward, so do as I taught you!"

Despite the occasional worried shout, our victory had all but been decided. I had drilled in with the rookies on how to gather in testudo formation, and although it was a little bit catawampus, it was doing the job—fitting, given their motivation. The shields were cheap battlefield salvage, but they were serviceable.

Whichever side lost their cool first would lose this battle. It was true that the four rookies were still only at III: Apprentice level in terms of skill, but we had drilled them enough that they wouldn't lose to a bunch of amateurs like this—ones who preyed on travelers too weak to defend themselves. Not only that, Siegfried was with them; *maybe* they would lose if a meteor were to literally streak down from the heavens directly on their heads.

That wasn't all—the cleanup of their annoying rear guard had just begun.

"Gwagh!"

A stewart fell headfirst from a tree just seventy paces away from me, squealing as he went in the funniest way. In the next moment, a mensch holding a sling took an arrow to the shoulder and fell before he could so much as swear.

Naturally, it was the work of our beautiful scout. She was the platonic image of a spectacular spider-girl—leaping from tree to tree as she picked off the entire rear guard one by one. The sight of them all clattering into the underbrush was like a traffic accident in slow motion. I sucked air through my teeth and winced, but I just couldn't look away. Poor bastards. I found it near impossible to keep track of Margit's movements. If her targets didn't make such a ruckus on the way out, then I doubt anyone would have been able to work out what was happening. From their perspective, they were living through a slasher flick—or they were, right up until they weren't.

Our formation was a few dozen paces away when the enemy vanguard halted, the sound of their fallen allies freezing them in their tracks.

"Now, Kaya!"

"Got it! Hiyah!"

Siegfried must have sensed this was the perfect moment. As we had planned, Kaya was hiding in the carriage—safe from arrow fire thanks to her potion—and received Sieg's signal loud and clear. She launched a brown bottle which, although it landed a mite off its mark, cracked open in a burst of smoke. Her little shout as she sent it flying through the air was cute, but the bottle's contents were anything but.

"Wha?! *Koff*!"

"Waaah... My eyes! My throat!"

"Ngh... The air...it burns!"

Kudos to another batch of our party's special sauce—tear gas. Making use of our position upwind, the haze swept over the enemy, rending through any exposed orifice—far more painful than the pollen assault that had almost killed us before the cursed cedar ichor maze.

"All right! Onward, guys—cut them down!" roared Etan.

“R-Raaah!” the other three rookies called out in response.

All of us had applied the protective salve in advance; we could walk into the AOE debuff without complaint. Kaya’s potion, which had really carried the day for us during the fray with Jonas Baltlinden, was derived pretty directly (thanks to my input) from its “less-than-lethal” relative in my world. I’d actually caught a face full of the stuff on a vacation abroad back in the day. The itching and the pain had made it feel as if my whole face, not just my nose and eyes, were on fire. It was so intense that by the time it had let up, I found myself collapsed on the floor with no memory of how I got there. This stuff was no joke.

At Etan’s cry, the unit raised their shields and started charging forward in a line. The bandits were already immobilized, and the battle was brought to a swift end. In all honesty, I felt a bit uneasy about even calling it a battle.

Clamor erupted from both sides: “Raaah!” “S-Sto— Argh!” “DIIIE!” “Gwagh...”

Even if they had someone who could brute force their way through the pain or if one of their rear guard was able to provide backup, it wasn’t enough—this was a one-sided assault. As I watched over the chaos unfurling, I could see fear erupting not only in the eyes of the enemy but also in the four rookies. There was no graceful way to engage in your first ever real-life battle.

“Hey, guys? Don’t overdo it, you hear? You’ll get more coin if you bring them in alive, and I guarantee it’s easier to drag around injured bandits than dead ones. You listening to me?”

Despite the mild pandemonium, I was glad to see that my half season of tutelage had borne fruit—everyone was swinging with good form and they held their blades steady and true. The fundamentals had been sufficiently drilled into them, and although in the heat of the moment they were letting their muscles do most of the work, they were actually using their swords as swords and not clubs.

Etan was a force to be reckoned with—as to be expected from his raw power. A bandit’s head went flying into the air along with his hand—whether held in defense or in a plea for mercy, we’ll never know.

As for Mathieu... *I know I told you to make sure to finish the job to avoid a foe on death’s doorstep wildly assaulting you, but that guy’s definitely very dead*

already. I had imagined that he would be used to killing already, as his werewolf pack were hunters, but I guess even for him, “prey” and “people” still scanned differently.

Martyn and Karsten were pulling their weight, despite not being blessed with the immense strength of our two demihumans. Siegfried had cleared about half of the bandits, but they had managed to kill one apiece. If you asked me, as first kills went in our line of work, they were all pretty fortunate.

This was far better than being caught in a losing battle with your seniors unable to even protect you. I called up a mental map of the remaining journey to the canton. We would be able to take most of these fools with us, so I thought about how to rearrange our carriage to carry some of the bodies. It was my new lovely big purchase—I was not going to let it be stained with filth and blood from a bunch of overconfident bandits.

[Tips] Knights often let their disciples take the heads of convicted criminals in order to avoid chaos such as this and acclimatize them to blood.

At the edges of a quiet canton, four young adventurers gazed up at the sky. Nature cared little for the roiling sentiment in their hearts, the endless blue above them free of clouds, almost as if in apology for the days of rain.

Strips of salted pork crackled merrily on the fire before them, coated in a special bean and herb sauce cooked up by Goldilocks Erich. This was the real reason they had been taken on this expedition—it was meant to be a simple outing where they would learn the ropes. Unlike the chaos of the previous day, their task today was to watch over the fire, making sure it didn’t go out and that the pork on the grill didn’t start to burn. This mission was assigned to them out of the kindness of their seniors’ hearts; the rookies were still shaken by having taken their first lives in battle, despite it being in self-defense. Erich had even foreseen their anger, their consternation, the question “What kind of devil makes someone cook wurst the day after they killed a man?!” His own dark humor had helped to keep them from stewing over what they’d done.

What they didn’t realize was that Goldilocks was pondering over his own

altered sense of normalcy in the heat of battle as he prepped the meat for the rookies to smoke.

“Um...” said the werewolf, his voice quavering.

“What?” said the audhumbla, not actually curious.

“I...killed them...didn’t I?”

“Yeah... Looks like it. And...looks like I did too.”

The goblin awkwardly scratched his long nose, and the mensch just looked at his hands—they didn’t know what to say.

“But...I didn’t really *feel* like I was killin’... It was... It was like slicing up a pig back ho—”

“Don’t finish that sentence!”

Etan didn’t let Mathieu finish his mumbling because he felt exactly the same way. He too was from the countryside. Although he was often set out to work in the fields, he too had dressed his share of livestock for smoking or drying. Meat, cut properly, all came apart in about the same way, regardless of whether the animal it came from was a person or not. Beasts wore no armor, generally. That was the sole difference of any weight in the moment.

An adventurer’s life came with certain bitter revelations. Any who held fast to the dream needed some way to swallow them. When the rush of battle had died down, you were left with the knowledge that you had stolen someone’s life, and your hands would continue to feel sticky with blood and human detritus no matter how much you cleaned them—for these young rookies, they could only sit and feel sick to their stomachs.

They almost wished there had been more resistance, more effort to it all; maybe then the reality would be easier to swallow. But Erich had taught them too well. None had imagined that an easy cut would make the truth of their deeds bear down on them heavier still.

“B-But...as I watch that meat sizzling there...”

Mathieu clutched at his chest, his ears flat upon his head, his whiskers drooping, his tail swishing slowly behind him. Such pain was the curse of his

humanity: something that no true wolf would ever have to face—only a pathetic human with a functioning conscience.

Their battle had none of the glory of a heroic tale, and none of the pathos of a tragedy. Their enemies had merely cried before they breathed no more. It was a part of life—a simple act and a simple end—so why did it hurt so much? Mathieu and the others all knew the nature of the work. All of them were prepared to die if they came upon an enemy that their joined might could not best. But as newly minted killers, they were tongue-tied, in spite of all the hours they'd spent preparing to stand on that privileged side.

"Jeez, look at you all. No energy in any of ya."

From behind the four came a familiar voice.

"S-Siegfried..."

"Keep it together—one of your fires is goin' out. Serve us up raw meat and you might kill us all. I don't wanna be grabbin' my stomach for the next few days 'cause of some undercooked pork."

"Oh! R-Right, sorry..."

Siegfried had come over to rouse up the rookies, but it had inadvertently turned into a lecture. His comment was completely apposite, of course, but he felt a little bad all the same. As he stood there wondering what to say *now*, four gloomy lads turned into five as he looked up at the sky, the sun still blazing cheerfully.

They stewed in this heavy atmosphere, a smudge upon the pastoral landscape around them; Siegfried picked up a piece of kindling and stared at it as he eventually found his words.

"A sword...is nothin' more than a tool for killing."

The sword that came to Siegfried's mind as he spoke was the looted thing passed to him during that twilight many months ago—a sword that he still used even now. Siegfried searched for the right words as he tried to remember what he had told himself in the aftermath.

"Whether you use it to plunder or protect, you're doin' the same thing. A

sword is a big ol' knife that you use to cut up your enemy. Now, I ain't sayin' it's uncool—it's real damn cool."

Everyone's first experience on the battlefield was different. Whereas the rookies at his feet had charged into battle to secure their win, Siegfried's first body had begged him to spare his life, tears streaming down his face, his guts crumbling out of an open wound. Even though the final result was the same, Siegfried knew that it was impossible for him to empathize with these four rookies, and vice versa.

"There's nothin' like the sword," he went on. "It's really like the songs say. When I look at its gleaming blade, I feel all sorts of fired up. It weighs ya down during the march, but that weight in your hands is like a fire under your ass."

Before Siegfried realized where his monologue was going, he had begun making these rookies aware of what they had done. He wondered what was worse—being killed or being constantly aware of death with every waking moment? Of course there was no way of knowing.

At any rate, everyone present faced and accepted death in different ways. Siegfried knew that.

Goldilocks, on the other hand, remained ever an enigma. Siegfried still couldn't comprehend how Goldilocks could switch into a heartless killing machine when he came to know someone as an enemy. The logic made sense in Siegfried's mind, but it was one of those thought experiments that nevertheless turned into a dilemma in the hero-hopeful's mind. He could not quite decide if, in a world where everyone was like Goldilocks, it would be one where wars would be rare and unsightly necessities, or one where everyone was dead.

"But what comes after swinging a sword is different from how the stories tell it. It's fuckin' scary, it's filthy, and it ain't cool. But you gotta accept that despite the dressin' up the stories get, we're doing the same thing as the heroes we look up to."

Siegfried twirled the branch in his hand; with each cut through the air it made, he gave a name: bandits, crooked local lords, thugs, villains, monsters, drakes, maddened demonfolk. Each of these were threats that could harm

innocents if an adventurer didn't nip their evil in the bud.

"We made it this far because heroes out there protected the world and stopped any of these from harmin' us or our families. You all have seen one for yourselves, right? A canton burned to nothin', orphans left without families. Especially in Ende Erde. There were loadsa kids back in my hometown who'd come from somewhere else you couldn't rightly put on the map anymore, livin' with distant relations 'cause that's all that's left."

A true hero protected people whom they would never see. They would shoulder the burden of doing what others did not wish to do.

It irked Siegfried to be parroting Goldilocks's own words, but they were the right ones to say. He had no other option but to borrow his lines. Seeing these young adventurers punish themselves for doing what they'd had to was just too painful.

"You can't do anything for the dead. But you gotta remember that *they* attacked *us*. They're the ones who chose to dirty their hands. If we hadn't bumped into them, who knows what other caravan or canton would've been targeted? Poor folk who are too weak to protect themselves. You need to accept that when standin' up for yourself."

"What do you mean?" said Mathieu.

"Standin' up for yourself means doing something scary to protect others."

Mathieu looked up at Siegfried after this.

"I ain't saying you need to get used to killing...just be proud of what you do. If you don't, then it's unfair to the guy you end up cutting down. Or would you prefer the guilt of thinking that the person you let get away ended up hurting some stranger somewhere else? It would hurt more than this."

Siegfried no longer had trouble sleeping, but the faces of those he had killed still sometimes appeared in his dreams. The last breath before the end; the splatter of blood on his face; the last words begging for forgiveness. Siegfried couldn't forget any of them, and never intended to. He would hold these memories with pride. After all, the good he'd done at that cost was just as indelible a mark upon him and his world.

“We bare our blades and stand up and take to the fray. Think about what that means and find somethin’ like peace. If you still wanna quibble after that, then you ain’t cut out for this line of work. It’d be better to head home and pick up the plow again.”

Siegfried tossed the sword-stick onto the fire and stood up slowly.

“A sword is a sword wherever you go. All that changes is who’s holdin’ it. If you wanna be an adventurer, a hero, then you gotta accept your blade as your fellow, a friend. Don’t be sickened by it. Be proud. You gotta think about what you’re doin’ every single time you draw it.”

“I like that, Sieg.”

It was Erich, holding some wurst ready for smoking. He’d approached without a sound. The fact that he was holding a box filled with Kaya’s magically made ice stood a bit at odds with the scene, but he seemed cheerful at Siegfried’s advice. His expression was soft, his steps light.

“You like what?”

“The idea of our blades being our fellows. Adventurers save innocents. We halt evil with our comrades. Without our swords at our sides we can’t *be* adventurers.”

A tool was a lifeless vessel, happy to perform any function it was made for. It took on a character of its own only when a human will was there to guide it. A device of the foulest imaginable purpose could be redeemed by an inventive soul with the mind to put it to the fairest possible ends.

“So,” Erich went on, “we should be friends to our blades too as we stand for justice. You’ve given me a good idea for a clan name, Sieg. Something that’ll help us to remember the lesson.”

“Oh yeah, I forgot about the whole name thing.”

Siegfried checked on the food and placed more wurst onto the grill as he recalled their discussion back in Marsheim.

“The Fellowship of the Blade. How about it? Cool, huh?” said Erich.

“Our blades are our fellows and we are fellows to our blades too, huh... Yeah,

not too shabby. I like it."

Siegfried almost felt a pang of jealousy with the ease with which the name had passed into being. It was short, punchy, heroic. What could be better?

"You guys happy with that?" he asked the rookies. The four of them exchanged glances before voicing their assent.

"Yeah! Thank ya, Siegfried! Wait, no—Big Bro Sieg!"

"Uh-huh, I feel cheerier already. Cheers, Bro!"

"H-Hold it!" Siegfried said. "Bro? *Big Bro Sieg*?! The hell's come over you guys? You're makin' me sound like some kinda gangster!"

Siegfried was the youngest of his family. A rush of embarrassment came over him at the thought that the nickname might stick. All the same, he couldn't deny that he kind of liked it. He could only stand awkwardly as the rookies clapped him on the back and sang his praises.

"Heh, glad we managed to come up with a name we all like. I was worried we'd have to go with Clan Goldilocks or something else equally bad. And hey, we're exactly where our first excursion was supposed to take us! I call that auspicious timing. Who wants to help me think up a crest?"

"Oy, don't get ahead of yourself, idiot. It costs a lot to get a pro to come up with one."

"Well, maybe we got someone who's artsy here! I can't engrave a ring or armor, but I could totally make a clasp for a cloak. If we aren't fussy, we could get some cheap metal or something."

"Gettin' ahead of yourself..."

And so, in the smoke of sizzling wurst, this clan of little renown finally became official. They were friends to, of, and bound by the sword—the Fellowship of the Blade. Later they would continue to uphold honor under the sword and they would venture forward in search of glory as adventurers.

Buoyed along by their excitement, they quickly settled on the wolf as their emblem—a widely understood symbol of pride and hunger, fit for a group of unprecedented young unknowns. Karsten, who had an artistic side to him, had

drawn it up in a few minutes, and the image of a wolf clasping a sword in its jaws must have really impressed Erich. Erich bought some wood from the canton and whittled it into clasps for everyone.

The sun was still in the sky as they affixed their new clasps. As long as they wore them, they vowed to ever devote themselves to the blade and walk the path of justice. Underneath the bright spring sky, these crazed fools, addled with dreams of their future exploits, made fervent small talk, celebrating the official founding of their clan.

[Tips] "The innocent find refuge from those bearing a sword and a wicked heart in those bearing a sword and a just heart."— An excerpt from *The Teachings of the Fellowship of the Blade* which spread in later years.

Summer of the Sixteenth Year

Informants

Generally, it is not in the GM's best interest to lie: the game is predicated on their reliability as a narrator, after all. That said, an element of the untrustworthy and unpredictable is still a powerful source of tension, and as such it is also in the GM's interest to create dangerous ambiguities that invite player speculation. Players, in turn, perpetuate this informational arms race by burning their PCs' hard-earned resources to keep a stable of trustworthy and knowledgeable NPCs.

"You need resolve if you want to become famous." I wasn't sure if it was a writer or a singer who said this, and there was no way of knowing now, but I was feeling the reality of it now.

"Hmm... What to do..."

I was back in my room in the Snoozing Kitten with a whole spread of documents scattered around me. The tip of my quill rested on my curled upper lip as I pondered the situation. We'd somehow managed to pull in almost too many jobs for our current headcount.

The Fellowship of the Blade was, no joke, the new big thing at the moment.

In the months from spring to summer, we had racked up quite a few gigs together. As our initial unit of eight adventurers, we had safely protected some caravans, eliminated some bandits holed up in a local lord's former manor, and rounded up five criminals lurking in the city.

Thanks to our efforts, our standing as a clan had risen. In turn, we'd received a flood of new requests from outside our stable of mediators and a small horde of applicants. Things weren't all smooth sailing though—with more benefits came more headaches that I had to deal with.

I knew being meticulous about playing our cards right now would save us all a

lot of trouble in the long run, but that didn't stop the whole process from sucking out loud from start to finish. *Hey, whoever designed this society? Yeah, you made a real hash of it... Mind rolling out some rebalanced material in the next errata sheet before I go insane?*

Jokes and gripes aside, this was far, far more preferable to the year I spent tidying up Lady Agrippina's loose ends after the Empire made her Count Ubiorum. I only made it through that whole mess in the first place because I'd been pounding back medicine and spells fine-tuned to keep me functional for four consecutive all-nighters at a time on average. The events themselves are a blur, but I was fairly certain my longest streak had been a *full week*.

I wanted to laugh at my past college self for thinking that people who boasted about being overworked just had poor time management skills. I had been but a babe in the woods, completely naive to the horrors of a truly overloaded schedule... Anyway, one late night after all this time wouldn't hurt.

"Right, I think we could leave this caravan guard job to Etan's group. They're still soot-black, but if he and Karsten join up with those two rookies who joined last week then they should be more than capable."

My current work was to divvy up our gigs and assign them based on the skills of our growing clan's roster. It amounted to administrative overview, but it was still a hefty job, despite using a bit of Farsight and other spells to smooth things over. I didn't have Lady Agrippina's completely broken perfect spatial recall, and my powers of critical thinking were strictly mortal; all I could do was painstakingly check every scrap of info that came my way, one by one.

"I can get Mathieu to show around this noble's children on their incognito visit to Marsheim, but maybe he'll need a little backup... Martyn's a diligent student, and he's gotten the hang of basic palatial speech, so I could send him in... But no, that leaves me with too few left in the roster who've been fully initiated..."

I scribbled drafts of different divisions of labor based on the spread of requests before me. As of this moment, the Fellowship of the Blade had eight members who could be sent on pretty much any gig without much trouble. On top of this we had gotten ten more members who I couldn't use as freely, since

I was still screening them. I couldn't just eyeball it; there was a chance we'd picked up some grifters who were just in it for the free perks of equipment, lodging, and some food. *On the other hand,* I thought, *we've dropped five members since last week, so these ones probably are a bit more trustworthy.*

"Hmm... No, no, we're still new. Maintaining a good rep is crucial. I don't want to screw up everyone's hard work. That means I need to assign our core members to each team or I'll be up all night worrying about something going wrong..."

I didn't want people to presume that the Fellowship of the Blade would just throw brute force and raw numbers at its problems like certain other clans I could name. Clients were only giving us jobs because our original party of four had built up trust in Marsheim and two of us were amber-orange—in usual situations, soot-black and ruby-red adventurers wouldn't even be given the time of day. If I just outsourced our jobs to the newest recruits all willy-nilly, then it would bring our achievements into question.

"So, uh... Maybe *I* should accompany the noble's kids? I feel a bit uneasy about sending Martyn alone. He's a smart guy, but he could use a confidence boost. Plus, he's a mensch—not the sort of guy who's gonna ward off potential ne'er-do-wells on looks alone."

I wasn't like some hands-off recruitment agency from my old world. My job wasn't simply to designate roles and be done with it; I had to make sure each group understood what was needed of them.

"Hold on, if I head out, then we can't do drills while I'm away... Siegfried and Kaya are off right now too..."

Although I still wasn't totally on board with the idea of being the leader of a clan, I'd stayed in my role as master to my disciples. I was still obliged to make sure they came out of the process fully prepared for the future in store for them, even if my measures were a bit spartan... Not that I'd left them with anything that wouldn't heal up fine in time, of course.

"Margit could step in and do some training, I guess... Oh, no, wait, she's on that top secret infidelity case—no one but her is cut out for that. Oh man, my brain's gonna overheat..."

I was literally losing sleep over all this schedule juggling. I wished I could just scan all these jobs and see all the sketchy parts laid out in bright red. It really would have made all the difference for my heart if I could just have the information nicely compiled in a handout so I could avoid all of the extra digging and fact-checking. *Come on, you asshole GM, think about what it's like to be handed a secret handout in the middle of a campaign where we're already choking on all the lore...*

"Even if all these requests are legit, I still want someone to do some basic fact-checking and ease my worries. Sucks that the last informant I worked with was such a bust..."

With my racing worries swirling around my brain, I picked up the stack of requests once more and looked through them. Divvying up my people wasn't the only problem here—even if I assigned my crew perfectly, we could still get screwed if any one of those jobs turned out to be a dud. I wasn't being paranoid—we had one request in early summer and three already this month that had all been designed to drag our little clan's name through the mud. Most of those we could credit to a few midsized clans with a vested interest in our collapse or a chip on their shoulder about having to actually *compete* a little for their gigs.

I wouldn't stand for any attack on our clan's rep, so I'd made sure that they knew nothing good would come of messing with us. Before taking on any request I made sure to do a bit of research, and if I found a stinker, lining up suitable payback was pretty straightforward. Even if you were called up into a basement parking lot and faced with a foe with an off-the-charts DEF score, there were always methods available to you. It would all be so simple if I could just carry over my playbook from one of my favorite video games from my old world—just overtune for Turning Ability, circle-strafe, and pour on the machine-gunfire or get good and weave in close to skewer 'em with a pile bunker.

The problem therefore lay in sussing out which ones were these "no hard feelings, but..." kind of gigs *before* accidentally taking the bait. Of course, some you could spot from a mile off—you just had to brace yourself for impact. The fallout was a bit of a pain too. This sort of competition was a huge drain—dealing with it ate up time and energy and paid out jack squat. All that you were left with was a sense of relief and exhaustion. You couldn't just ignore them

either—you had to do a proper job, or your rep was in jeopardy.

We'd been doing fine right at the start! We were a small clan, so we only had a few requests to manage at a time. We could spend a little time sniffing around, find the perp, then pay them a little visit. But when you had a clan of nearly twenty people, the request pile grew exponentially, and you had to waste so much more time vetting everything.

"No... I'm exhausted. I need some fresh air. Time for a little break."

This whole process took it out of me. There just wasn't enough time in the day to do my due diligence, unless I could start milling out clones. Wait, no, bad idea. I totally bet that clone one and clone two—who I would assign with admin and instruction of our disciples, respectively—would just band together to bury me in a shallow grave for striking off on another rollicking adventure while they sustained my grind.

I wasn't the only one being overworked. Margit was pretty near her limit with her reconnaissance work. She was a talented scout and a top-rate spy, but she wasn't built for information warfare. Sneaking in somewhere and pilfering the goods was a whole other ballgame from the kind of muckraking and puzzling out that the job really called for.

The natural solution to our current problem was to find an informant who could take the load off of our shoulders, but it wasn't like folks I trusted implicitly grew on trees or anything. The one that Miss Laurentius hooked me up with seemed a bit too easily bought, so I was at a bit of a loss.

That wasn't to say that Miss Laurentius had a bad eye for people. The problem was that we had our own individual connections columns. The informant might have been faithful to her, but their only obligation to me came from the weight of the purse that passed between us. Miss Laurentius hadn't been trying to screw me over; she'd actually felt so bad about the situation that she apologized directly to me.

It was cathartic, but it didn't get me anywhere. I wasn't a single assarius richer for the effort. It's not like she was entirely to blame in the first place. Miss Laurentius had her vicious aura and huge clan to lean on, and I'd let my guard down because of my in with her and got a fair bit too chummy with her

gossipmonger.

“Who knew just how much work would come of pooling a little group together...”

As the sun began to set, I headed to the Snoozing Kitten’s yard with Schutzwolfe on my waist and began to stretch. Shymar was probably preparing dinner, Fidelio was most likely out shopping, and the old master was almost guaranteed to be on the roof having a nice nap. Merchants were busy in the summer, and so the Snoozing Kitten had few guests. The clothesline was filled with no one’s laundry but my own.

“I’m liking this other side of adventuring, but I can’t let my sword skills get rusty.”

I unsheathed my precious sword and gave it a few practice swings. I felt uneasy about the discrepancy in how light my body felt and how it wouldn’t move exactly like I wanted it to.

If you chose to be generous with the benefits for your newbies, then you would attract folks who only wanted a free lunch. If you put a high price on information, you would draw in equivalently greedy individuals looking for a big blowout. There was a Kamakura-era samurai who advised that one ought to keep their garden decorated with freshly severed heads to set the appropriate tone with one’s guests; it was probably a bad sign that I was starting to see where he was coming from. It wasn’t a bad idea to make a hard, clear statement of one’s own gravitas to ensure you went into most encounters with the upper hand.

I hadn’t foreseen headaches like these a few months ago. I was putting in the hours for the sake of our town and a great adventure, so why did I have to waste my time dealing with minor administrative issues and people who wanted my clan to eat dirt? I know I was still on my journey, but I couldn’t help but be in awe at Mister Fidelio’s ability to seemingly breeze his way to no-foolin’ heroism *and* stumble upon the love of his life.

I joked about my luck, but I was starting to wonder if my entire life was cursed to awful rolls...

No, keep a level head, Erich. There’s no need to rush. You’re not in a situation

where you'll be wiped out if you don't give up every last piece of intel you have with no way of striking back. Take it slow and you'll find your way through to the other side.

I couldn't let my frustration trip me up. I would keep on giving it my best and not try to take any unnecessary shortcuts.

My heart started to feel lighter as I kept up my swings, a light sweat emerging in the cool summer afternoon.

Yeah, keep it easy, and don't blow up over nothing. You can never tell what someone's thinking when you first meet them, so stay courteous and polite while you have to. You'll have all the time in the world to bare your fangs once you know they're evil.

The Fellowship of the Blade had built up a reputation for being diligent and thorough. We didn't botch our jobs because we never rushed them—this alone had set us apart from our fellow clans. If the clan's head started acting like an impatient ass, then I'd really end up putting my foot in my mouth.

"You there," I said, "I'm not sure what I think of someone who conceals their presence and enters the range of my sword."

"Oho?"

I sheathed my sword out of common courtesy and placed my hand atop the pommel. This was a way of showing the person you were talking to that you meant no harm—it was harder to draw your sword quickly when your palm was right on the end.

In the next moment, it felt as if the fabric before me had transformed into a woman—such was the smoothness in the way she appeared.

"Ya saw me, huh?"

She was a bubastisian, and a smidgen taller than me—just under five foot eight, I would say. She was dressed in pretty typical women's garb for Marsheim, and her entire body was covered in white fur. Her golden eyes were striking. The light pink of her nose and ears charmed the hell out of me, but I knew I couldn't let my guard down. Sure, looking at her made you want to grab her cheeks and give them a squeeze and tell her how adowable she was, but

she had managed to sneak into my range without me noticing her. She was a dab hand at concealing her presence.

“Hmm? But yer range, ya say? I’m still twenty whole paces from ya.”

“Still close enough to manage in one movement.”

I wasn’t feigning arrogance—my current skill set allowed me to do exactly as I had just said. Mind you, at *thirty* paces I’d be in trouble—I’d need to actually close the gap a bit before striking—but at this range I could cut her down in one beat.

“What’s got you so interested in me? You’ve been there for at least thirty minutes.”

“Criminy... Spotted me since I got here, huh? You’re a toughie, I’ll give ya that. I shoulda kept my distance.”

Her eyes scrunched up when she smiled. Bubastisians were cute in the eyes of mensch whether they were fresh out of their litter or on the way to the grave, but I hadn’t met someone as beautiful as her before. She had an unplaceable sense of grace—*elegance*, maybe.

And yet again I couldn’t let appearances deceive me. I could sense a self-assurance that lay beneath that smile.

And then there was her *accent*. It gave away her roots in the central Imperial cantons. I'd heard it during my time in Berylin. It scanned a bit more clearly than northern or southern Rhinian, and it had a unique sort of charisma. Even palatial speech written down verbatim in the accent came off sort of lilting and musical—a quality reflected in many of its speakers.

The central region was famous for the Rhine River, for which our Empire got its name, which was home to a massive port. The tributaries that snaked across the land meant that it was a mercantile gateway to the rest of the Empire. It was strange to see a midlander this far west.

"I can't be gettin' lax, y'hear. Ain't no good t'forget there's folk who're sharper than me. But, y'know, coulda fooled me. I'd pegged mensch as bein' among the duller knives in the drawer. Y'got some quality peepers."

The white bubastisian cleared the distance between us in one quick hop. With her digitigrade legs, the movement was strangely natural.

"You'll pardon me if I'm a little sensitive to who's hanging around in back-stabbing distance. Particularly when I have my sword drawn."

"Huh? Don't go tellin' me a sweet thing like you's tied up in the sorta bad business that gets folks sniffin' after your blood in the water?"

The way she had approached me had been so fluid that I felt no internal resistance to it; I could barely register the movement. This way she had of sneaking under my danger radar told me she was going to be a small ordeal to work with—just like an overly amicable cat, really.

"Well, my work involves a little roughhousing, so I suppose you could say so. Although I don't remember cutting down anyone the rest of the world would miss too sorely."

"Ahh, I getcha. Yeah, the mistress said you can be a li'l cold from time to time. Kinda like a noble lady. Polite to ev'rybody, but keeps her cards close to her chest."

"You've done your research. I suppose I don't need to introduce myself, then?"

Sure, she'd melted out of the shadows to drip-feed me ominous indications that she knew me better than I knew her, but her tone was just so sweet that I couldn't help but feel at ease. I couldn't make out a single spell anywhere on her that would've explained her charisma. It was something that she just naturally possessed.

There was no need to worry—I wasn't a complete idiot. I wasn't the sort of two-bit goon who'd fall for an obvious honey trap. I could sense myself being drawn in, but I knew better than to let her have her way. I imagined that this was a similar feeling to how it felt to be on the receiving end of Absolute Charisma—a trait I'd spent a good while banking experience for.

"Nee hee, yep, you're Erich of Konigstuhl. Goldilocks Erich. Stonecutter Erich. And, most recently, Erich, leader of the Fellowship of the Blade. Whatcha prefer?"

Man, I thought, *she's got that feline cute factor...* She seemed nothing like Shymar, who had a more plain-spoken, girl-next-door sort of charm. "Bewitching" was the word that suited this new gal best.

"Just call me Erich."

"For sure? Woulda figured you were buttoned up a li'l too tight, if ya catch my drift."

The way she closed the gap between us; her choice of words; her bodily movements; the distance of our faces; her twitching whiskers as she spoke; the tail that swished just out of view—I wasn't sure how conscious any or all of these were, but they were calculated to undermine all my most cynical impulses. It was a constant attack on my psyche that sought to sway my every impression of her. I'd never met someone as openly affable as this, even in Berylin's high-society jungle.

Maybe such smooth operators *did* exist in the capital, but the fact was that I'd had to hold myself in a completely different manner back then. I had to be thinner than air while treading on eggshells, terrified that any misstep could result in my head toppling onto the plush rug below. It didn't matter what kind of person I was with. My job was to avoid being noticed by anyone important.

I took a moment to be impressed yet again at what a *menagerie* this world

was. You didn't meet someone like her every day.

"Very well. Shall I present myself in a manner more pleasant to your eye, young madam? Would you honor me with your name?"

"Oof, now that's some palatial speech. I feel like I could poke ya and you'd fall over, you're so stiff! It's like ya built a li'l wall, right here!" The bubastisian smiled as she repositioned to face me. "They call me Schnee. Nice to meetcha, Erich. Lookin' forward t'our blossomin' relationship."

"Nice to meet you too, Schnee. Although the nature of our relationship is yet to be decided."

Schnee, huh? It was a simple name—it just meant "snow"—but it wasn't one that people in the Empire often gave to their children. Snow meant evanescence, fleeting things, and cold, creeping death. Not the sort of name you wanted to give your newborn daughter without a lick of irony, if you'll permit me to be a bit pithy.

Maybe it was a pseudonym. Or maybe her parents were from a place where snow was associated with beauty before its chill. Whatever the case, nothing could shake the first impression she'd given—someone who could be socially invisible for a half hour straight and then turn up her presence *all the way* on command.

"Heh, yeah, well, I guess ya got a point there. But, to speed things along, let me just say that I've got a nose for rumors... Ya feel me?"

An informant? Now this was a little *too* fortunate. Had she waited until I'd run my options dry? Maybe she wanted to get on the inside of our clan to gather information for someone else.

I had been working hard to make sure no one found out where I lived on a permanent basis, yet she'd found me. Not only that, she knew *when* to be here. She must have had a line in to my operation already. I mean, sure, *maybe* she'd come rocking up in my time of need for completely innocent reasons and had chosen to shoot her shot now out of pure coincidence, but knowing my luck stat, that *couldn't* be right.

I had been fed on a decent diet of media where someone whose appearance

screamed “I’m the female lead!” was actually the traitor. It had seeped into the cultural zeitgeist so much that I knew many a GM who’d leveraged the trope to buy even the most stoic player’s lip-trembling, tear-soaked sympathy for such future turncoats. One of the tenets that kept me safe was to always have the worst-case scenario in mind. Even if someone strolled up to you and said, “Hello, I’m your ally,” that didn’t guarantee that they would maintain that role right to the end. Everyone had their price, and you never knew when someone else might be paying it.

“Righty, well, how ’bout a li’l taster?”

Bubastisians’ thin fingers were coated with short hairs. Her fingertips (or toetips or pawtips or whatever the correct term would be), second joints, and palms had pink paw pads. Bubastisians didn’t wear shoes, so I could see that her feet were exactly the same. Clasped between those toe beans was a single sheet of paper—a cheap thing made from plant fiber instead of more expensive sheepskin. It was probably about A4-sized unfolded and didn’t seem to be imbued with anything magical.

Nothing’s more valuable than a freebie; I set aside the thought that gacha games used the very same logic (who can resist a free first ten roll?) to lure the innocent to ruin and took the paper in my own hands.

“Can I trust this?”

“Trust is decided by whoever receives the intel, Erich. My business is gatherin’ up info, sendin’ it along to an interested party, and askin’ how much they wanna part with for it. The rest is up to you.”

Schnee lithely moved into my blind spot, as if to escape from my narrowed gaze. Without a sound she moved to the kitchen door.

“If it takes your fancy, gimme a call anytime. You’re the kinda fella who only believes it when he sees it, yeah? The Empty Hive’s one of my haunts, so pop on by anytime ya like. Be seein’ ya.”

She slipped through the crack in the door and disappeared. I had to say, she’d made a hell of a hard sell. She knew what it was that was bugging me the most.

“She’s got the names of every rookie that joined after Martyn...as well as

where they're all from."

I memorized the paper before turning it to ash. Names, races, birthplaces, their reasons for being an adventurer, their previous jobs where applicable. The evaluations of each person that followed were all correct. Not only that, she'd even included the members with bad evaluations—in other words, the ones who left after deciding that my methods just didn't gel with them. The cold, clinical presentation was so at odds with her airy personality.

Dammit... I felt a chill run down my spine at how accurate her intel was. Even I didn't know *everything* about every member in my clan; I felt a bit sick. If she'd slipped in a little lie, I wasn't sure I'd ever be able to spot it.

"I...need to talk to someone about this... I feel a migraine coming on."

When Margit was back from her gig, I'd talk to her.

But godsdamn, she'd sniffed out my base here quick. I'd always taken measures to make sure I wasn't being followed—I had caught a few people this way—always took different routes, wore different clothes, and even got Margit to stay on lookout now and again. Had she leaked this info to other clans?

Clan Laurentius were pretty open about their hideout, and the Baldur Clan weren't perfect in this regard either. The one thing I was grateful for was that my relationship with Siegfried and the others was strong enough to not suspect them.

At any rate, I needed to reevaluate our opsec. It would be difficult to bring the rookies up to my watertight standards, but it was better than doing nothing.

"But a spy, huh... I thought one of them was a bit suspicious, but *really*? Ugh, to think I'd finally understand what drives a noble to burn a fortune purging their woes..."

I dragged my heavy body back inside and left my sword in my room before heading out. Margit would be back in the evening, so I decided to spend the next while in the baths. Work could wait. If I didn't ease this tension in me then I felt I would fail my next Sanity check.

Unable to decide whether I had stumbled upon a miracle or a nightmare, I heaved myself to the calming solace of a hot bath.

[Tips] Informants are a staple in TRPG systems as a vehicle for delivering new scenarios and warnings of incoming danger to the player characters.

However, it isn't a job which someone needs permission to take on. A player must either trust the word of their GM or see with their own two eyes whether an informant is friend or foe.

I remember back in my old world that there was this old sitcom "married couple" trope—the lady of the house catches her husband right as he's in from work, wanting to hash out some sticking point about how the kid's doing at school, which the dad immediately deflects with some curt display of his exhaustion. Today, I'd become the wife in this scenario.

"Really? Now of all times?"

Margit let out a mighty sigh as she shrugged off her cloak. It was custom-tailored to help her blend in with her surroundings—a reversible model, ruddy brown on one side to match Marsheim's brickwork and nearly black on the other for covert work in full darkness.

I knew my TV dramas well enough to hold my tongue instead of firing back that I was *just as tired, slaving over a hot stove all day for the both of us*. Instead, I said, "I really am sorry. Rough shift on the reconnaissance job?"

"Physically, I am fine. But one can only watch strangers canoodle for so long before it takes a toll."

I took Margit's cloak from her, cast a quick Clean on it, and hung it up. Then I helped her out of her sweaty clothes and into a new set.

"The *good* news is that we have all the evidence we need. I have the name of the object of our target's infidelities, where they rendezvoused, a solid estimate of the value of the jewels he gave her, and a full breakdown of their daily routine. I should think that it should suffice—he won't be worming out of this one."

One of Marsheim's finest undercover workers threw a stack of papers onto the table in a single swift motion. Sure, we were some generations of

technological progress out from furnishing our client's attorney with a manila folder full of twenty-seven eight-by-ten glossy color photos with circles and arrows and such or anything, but this fat pile of dirt on our man would pin him to the wall just fine. I flicked through the pages and saw that we'd even outlined each of his *meals* in excruciating detail. Not even the slipperiest of characters could get out of this one.

"Ugh... You even wrote down what he says in the bedroom?"

"I was lipreading, so take about a fifth of that with a grain of salt."

Margit's exhaustion was clearly well-earned. Arachne were far better than mensch at staying still and keeping watch, but having to wade through even a fraction of all this tiresome smut would test *anyone's* will to live.

"I don't really get why the guy would throw away his chances with a mistress after marrying into such a well-off merchant family," I said. "When his wife and father-in-law get their hands on this, I'd bet good money his head rolls..."

This infidelity case had been brought to our attention shortly after the client had noticed an irregularity in their business's finances. The client was the new head of a merchant family who had taken on the operation after the old master —his father—retired. At first, he thought it'd just been some amateur slipup with his calculations. At one point he'd theorized that there'd been a burglary the family had collectively failed to notice. However, as he became more vigilant, he began receiving sporadic reports from their clients, who said that their newest employee—the master's daughter's husband, who had recently wedded into the family—wasn't showing up to meetings. Before long he'd become their prime suspect. The master tailed him to find out where the money was going; it was pretty obvious that it was all being funneled into his mistress's pockets, but the master wasn't confident in his muckraking abilities, so his mediator asked us to furnish them with some watertight evidence.

Our client was fuming. I could hardly blame the guy. He had let his daughter marry for love—a difficult prospect for *anyone* in this day and age—and yet he had disgraced not only her, but her father as well. The daughter was going to be heartbroken. What had convinced her husband to embroil himself in such daytime soap fodder? There was blood yet to be spilled. I was sure of it.

“Man, I’m not looking forward to briefing the mediator... It wasn’t even an arranged marriage! Why’d he just toss her to the side like that?”

“Who knows. He’s quite handsome; perhaps he tricked her.”

Margit untied her hair and let the curls fall down. I caught a glimpse of the nape of her neck in a gap in her tresses, the sight making my heart skip a beat.

Margit shot me a strange expression.

“Wh-What?” I asked.

“I saw the way you looked at me,” she said, a devilish grin playing over her lips as she sat down on the bed. I realized that she’d probably taken her hair down like that to signal to me that she was tired and in need of some TLC.

“I didn’t think I was that obvious.”

“I don’t mind—in fact, I *like* all the attention I get from you.”

I took a comb and sat down on the bed. Margit moved so gracefully in front of me that it seemed like she had floated there, and sat in the space between my legs. With the back of her head left vulnerable and exposed, I enjoyed the special and unique privilege of touching her hair. Did that idiot not realize how lucky this kind of relationship is? I couldn’t fathom the depths of his idiocy. Just how much untethered, virulent lust must you have to ruin your life like that?

“Ahh... That feels lovely.”

I chuckled. “I imagined you must be feeling rather exhausted, madam.”

“That I am... It’s heavenly.”

While combing Margit’s hair I took the opportunity to give her head a little massage. She melted into me as the stress of her job faded away.

“You did really great out there, honestly. You got him two days before our deadline too! You dug his grave, and he walked straight into it. My partner is truly incomparable.”

“Mmm... Your praise won’t get you anything...but it is appreciated.”

I moved my hands down to her neck, then shoulders, then back, as I undid each little knot of stress. I tied up her hair in her usual two bunches and gave

the back of her head a kiss. She smelled faintly of sweat and her usual sweet musk.

“I honestly can’t believe how much the informant managed to dig up on us. It isn’t like I was gone that *long*. I wonder how she found out where we lived,” Margit said, kindly returning to the topic I had thrust upon her as soon as she’d come in through the door. I reaffirmed to myself yet again how lucky I was to have Margit—she kept me safe, keeping eyes where I couldn’t see, even putting aside her exhaustion to discuss the matter with me.

“We could spend hours thinking and not come up with a decent answer. I doubt we’re in danger—no one’s stupid enough to do something on the saint’s doorstep.”

“I doubt we’re going to be trailed, but let’s keep our wits about us.”

“Agreed. Erich, I appreciate how much you trust me, but please do not treat me like some kind of perfect agent. Who knows if I could even spot her. She might have *allowed* you to catch her in the yard, you know?” Margit said. I admired her modesty despite everything too.

But perhaps she was right—maybe Schnee *was* testing me. She might have made herself just shy of invisible to test whether I was sharp-eyed enough to fish her out. I much preferred it when people announced their intent to kill up front. That she’d kept her approach within the periphery in my vision the whole time made it difficult to pin down how to react. I was still in the process of setting up the groundwork; I would have preferred that she didn’t poke at our fort’s weakest point.

“Agreed... I’ll talk to Zenab when I see her next and ask if she has any antitracking charms.”

“Who knows what magical traps could be waiting for us? Who knows, maybe our enemies employ a *terrifying swordsman* with a *secret arsenal of spells*.”

Her remark was right on the money. I couldn’t simply count out the possibility that I wasn’t the only one refusing to show my true colors. It would be prudent to take care.

We decided that nothing would come of worrying or even discussing the

matter with just the two of us, so we headed out to the Snowy Silverwolf for some dinner. Lately we'd headed there once a day to maintain a good rapport with the other members of the Fellowship.

"There you are," Mister John said after we had barely taken a step in through the door, before the proverbial first round of waters had even been laid out—not that anybody here would hand out clean tap water for *free* in this world, of course. From his tone, he wasn't happy with us; I made a frantic mental inventory of everything I could possibly have done to get under his skin.

"That's him. Not the same guy, huh?"

"Huh? What's...going on?"

Mister John's remark was directed at an elderly mensch gentleman perched straight as a stick on a nearby stool.

"Is he here to see me?" I asked.

"Not exactly," Mister John replied. "You didn't go to Heidewitt canton in early summer, did ya?"

"Heidewitt? I was doing some investigating down the Mauser in early summer. Client asked me to sort out some river pirates."

I don't know what Heidewitt had to do with anything—the canton was *up*river along the Mauser from here. My little tumble with that pack of damp bandits had been the most involved undertaking in my whole spread of gigs around the start of summer. The weeks after that I'd been busy with clan stuff—there had been no time to take the four-day journey east to a canton under the jurisdiction of Altheim...

"U-Um, if I may?" the elderly man said. "Are you really...Goldilocks Erich?"

"Erich's a common enough name; I'm sure you could find plenty of Erichs hereabouts. But in all Ende Erde, there's only one Goldilocks, as far as I know."

"A-And your arachne partner is...?"

"Margit of Konigstuhl. My name isn't particularly rare either."

The man's expression changed. The blood began to drain from his once-livid face as he came to some sort of realization.

“If you would like, I can show you my adventurer’s tag. You can take down my number and cross-reference my identity with the Association if you like.”

The man’s gaze kept flitting from my face to elsewhere. I didn’t know what he wanted from me, but suddenly he leaned over in his chair in a deep bow. We didn’t have the kind of bowing culture that Japan did here in the Empire, but if we did, I was sure his forehead would be planted firmly in the floorboards.

“M-My deepest apologies! I b-beg your forgiveness!”

“I must apologize as well—I have no idea what this is all about. How about you take a deep breath and gather yourself. What do you know, Mister John?”

“He’s been here all afternoon screeching about wanting to see Goldilocks Erich. Apparently you treated his granddaughter horribly and he’s demanding compensation in coin at the very least.”

“You *what*?”

The tone I reserved only for the most horrid of crooks came out.

“Erich.”

“Ah! Sorry, Margit...”

This wasn’t good. I’d been on edge since the incident with Schnee. For all I knew, this was a respectable gentleman, not some two-bit gossip who needed my name beaten out of his lying mouth. It wouldn’t do to act like some goon shaking down an innocent yokel. The facts certainly sounded horrible, but it wouldn’t do to frighten the poor guy.

“A-Allow me to explain,” the man finally said. “A short while ago, y-your tale reached our little canton. B-Before long, a man showed up...claiming that he was Goldilocks Erich.”

The man’s quivering grew more intense; his voice shook, though whether it was out of upset or frustration, I couldn’t tell. I mentally smacked myself on the forehead for accidentally baring my fangs—he was just the messenger! I needed to keep a decent rein on my emotions if I were to treat everyone with the respect they deserved. I put on a calmer front and patiently listened to his story.

The long and short of it was that I'd picked up an impersonator.

A young man with gold hair and blue eyes—not common in the Empire—had visited this man's canton and proclaimed himself *the* Goldilocks Erich as spoken of in the recent song in circulation. He'd claimed to have wrapped up a bandit hunt nearby and chosen Heidewitt as his next rest stop. The locals had extended this veritable hero a warm welcome.

The old man had given him a room, but this doppelgänger of mine had paid him back in the worst way possible. Not only did he beg for some money to "help him on his way," he'd also bedded the man's granddaughter—even in a world as grim and amoral as our own often was, a clear abuse of the lady's trust and violation of her consent, given his false claims. Before he left, the doppelgänger had said he would be back before midsummer with money paid back in kind and his hand in marriage for the granddaughter. Yet the fake Goldilocks never returned, and so the irate old man came to Marsheim to find the perpetrator for himself.

"Ugh... I can't believe it," I muttered.

"I-I'm so terribly sorry! I said such terrible things about you! P-Please forgive me..."

"I told him," Mister John said. "He was moaning about you all afternoon, causing a fuss in here; I made a fair account of your character against every point he raised, but he railed on still."

Mister John seemed to have nothing against the man himself—just the severity of his behavior—but this was apparently the last straw for our poor petitioner. He slumped over in utter dejection.

"It's not his fault, Mister John. A song's a poor substitute for a proper description. It's a con *anyone* with blue eyes and gold hair could run."

It went without saying that there was nobody out there holding the song-cycles to rigorous journalistic standards. They weren't biographical works of nonfiction; there was only so much you could expect from how the persons within were described. It certainly wouldn't outfit you to pick the genuine article out of a police lineup.

Without mass-reproducible media or DNA identification, it was difficult to prove you were you beyond a shadow of a doubt (not that there weren't also sticking points even with *those* methods back home). This went all the more for someone you were meeting for the first time. Trust went a long way here. I didn't want to blame this man for assuming someone who matched up with the guiding principle of "if it looks like a duck, swims like a duck, and quacks like a duck" was who they said they were. He had been wronged by this fake me, so I couldn't blame him for blowing off steam by shouting all kinds of hell in this adventurers' tavern for most of the day either. It would be easy for me to shout hell at *him* in turn, seeing as he was here in front of us, but the real person in the wrong here was the bastard cheating and date-raping his way across the country using my name.

"Not only that, there are so many incidents of young men who prey upon fathers with lost sons in the same way. The only real difference is that here my name in particular has been misused."

While forms of official photo ID were commonplace in my old world, the common person had nothing of the sort here. Of course, magic or miracles could smooth this sort of situation over quite handily, but in almost all cases you had to rely on memory, critical thinking, and the good word of others. It was no surprise that charlatans ran rampant. All it took was a little bit of digging to work out the general picture of the person you wanted to imitate and a bit of sweet-talking and, hey presto, you had your scam.

From what I could tell from this case, our suspect was a dab hand. He was a trickster with an overtuned Persuasion skill, no doubt with a long trail of broken hearts and empty wallets in his wake.

Mister John sighed. "You're right. I shouldn't be angry at either of you, really." He scratched at his scruffy black hair before walking into the kitchen with the unspoken message that he'd leave us to sort out this thing. I gathered that he knew I wouldn't rest easy until I had solved my own problems.

This had come at the wrong time, to be honest. I was already losing sleep with my current workload—now I had to waste resources on a doppelgänger? Gods help us both, if this man didn't practically line our mutual enemy's neck up on the chopping block *for* me, I could not be held accountable for what I did next.

I tamped down on my bubbling anger once more—this deflated old man was not the target of my frustration. He and I were both victims in this. Nothing would come of moaning at him; at best, I'd draw some flak for publicly harassing a poor old man.

"I, um... I, uh, am terribly sorry, how can I..."

"You really don't need to apologize anymore, sir. What's your name?"

"Ah! My apologies! I am Guido of Heidewitt."

I helped Guido to his feet and guided him to a table. I refrained from taking him to our usual seat—a few of the rookies whom I had trained this morning were still there, glaring daggers at him. They must have protected my good name all through the day. Man, I never felt "devil's proof" was a more fitting term until now. How difficult it was to prove you *didn't* do something...

I sat down Guido and asked one of the barmaids to bring him a mug of water. After a few sips, his tremors finally stopped, and he seemed to reclaim some sense of composure.

Now, this is the true testing ground of my tolerance.

"Now, Guido. You mentioned that you were swindled out of one drachma. Your family must be rather well-off, no?"

"Y-Yes... We have been the canton's landlord for the past seven generations, and we own our own modest farm. I have been retired for a while now and had set aside that money for a silk gown for my granddaughter's eventual wedding."

His expression, gestures, body language, words—none of these indicated that he was lying. His hands betrayed his age, but the quality of his nails revealed that he wasn't a laborer. It looked like he was your typical landlord who organized farmers and lived off their spoils without doing the actual fieldwork.

The slight leathery cast of his face indicated that even if he didn't till the fields himself, he oversaw their daily grind in person. It didn't look like he had faked the remains of sun damage all to trick me. If this *was* all an act? Well, I'd be happy to give Guido here his Oscar. Never mind me—if he fooled *Mister John*, a genuine veteran in the business, he'd have earned it.

“I see... Could you describe this man once more for me?”

“He was...one finger’s width or so taller than yourself. You both have golden hair, but you don’t have his freckles.”

“You say he had golden hair, but was it the exact same shade as mine? How about the length?”

It was true that my hair was sometimes annoying to deal with because of how long it was, but between my alfar companions and my sweet sister—who would *bawl* if I chopped it off—I had cause to take pride in keeping it nice and shiny. Bath trips were a must. I had it brushed every day. I put hair oil in it when I could. Heck, I even micromanaged how I *slept* to minimize bedhead. I’d overheard a performance of my song once where the poet sang that “little girls bit their blankets in frustration as their jealousy fizzed and bubbled at the sight of his luminous mane,” so forgive me if I was a little bit touchy about people looking down on my namesake.

“Ahh, well... To be honest, it looked nothing like yours. It was...a bit darker. It was long, yes, but stopped just before his shoulders.”

This was useful information. With his dull, shoulder-length hair, freckles, and similar height, I was beginning to assemble a pretty thorough picture of the cad.

“But his sword was the real deal. Even I was impressed with it. His hands were lined with calluses, like a real watchman’s. I suppose that was what really fooled me...”

Fake Me had to be a fellow adventurer, or a mercenary, or some sort of itinerant laborer. This was more than enough to ferret him out. He must have heard the story, looked at himself in the mirror, and thought the bet was worth chancing.

Guido had been around the block a few times, so he must have known that these kinds of heroic tales tended to employ a fair bit of artistic license. That, in turn, had left him room to convince himself the discrepancy in appearance wasn’t a red flag.

“Thank you very much, Guido. This has been very useful. I respect you for coming all the way to Marsheim for your granddaughter’s sake.”

This would be enough for me to get started. Now all I had to do was show him how big my heart was.

“Hm?! N-No, I can’t! Please, take it back!”

I had just placed three gold coins into his palm and clasped his fingers over them to make sure he kept them. A few drachmae was a cheap price to pay for my good name. I wanted him to take it no matter what.

“And take this for your granddaughter.”

Guido was already flustered enough, so I felt a little bad, but I needed to give him this, at least. I had used Farsight to get a view of my head from above and had cut off a lock of my hair. I gave it to him carefully encased in a handkerchief with some embroidery that I had personally done.

“This won’t be nearly enough to assuage her soul after losing her maidenhead so cruelly, but I hope it will be proof enough that you did your best on her behalf.”

“I-I couldn’t possibly! This hair is the stuff of songs!”

“I beg of you to take it. I hope you will tell your granddaughter what happened today.” This would hopefully stand as proof enough that he had been righteously angry on his daughter’s behalf, that he had begged forgiveness for his foolishness, and that he’d received it from me. “I will make sure justice is dealt to the scoundrel.”

At that, I saw Guido off.

“Are you really sure, boss? Couldn’t he have been sent by the crook, hungry for more coin?” Etan said as I smiled at a job well done. He was the rookies’ de facto spokesman now; if he said it, they all must have been thinking it. I pulled out my pipe and took a deep drag before giving him a bold smile.

“Well, I guess our perp here wasn’t in it purely for the money, Etan. Besides, did you see that man’s face? I’ve never met someone more honorable and straitlaced than a small town’s landlord. I’m sure to have guaranteed that my name, even if it was dragged through the mud by my imitator, will be respected through Heidewitt and beyond. I’m just buying myself a little insurance against any future wannabes making a play for fame and fortune using my name.”

My actions weren't solely out of sympathy for Guido and his granddaughter. For all intents and purposes I was marketing myself. Guido had come here fuming, ready to beat the living pulp out of the swine, but instead he found someone eager to lend a magnanimous ear. I was sure that he would answer my compassion in kind.

"And Etan, rest assured—I may not look it, but right now I'm positively *incandescent* with rage."

"You are?"

Etan cocked his head in confusion—he couldn't link my words to *anything* in my demeanor. Though I had raised my voice in front of the rookies before, never had I truly gotten angry at them. Even during our first meeting, when we had ended up "duking it out" in the yard, I had responded to his jibes with some grace.

But know this, Etan: I care about my rep, okay?

I was still but a fledgling adventurer, but I had friends I was proud of and family that admired me. For someone to take all that and use it to deflect blame for such heinous and base behavior—well, I could never, *ever* let them get away with it.

"Mocking me means slinging mud in the faces of my comrades, my family, and those I value."

There would be no ifs or buts now—justice would be served to its absolute limit.

I had worked my ass off day after day to build up a good reputation for myself. I wouldn't let someone misuse it for such perverse ends and leave me to deal with the fallout.

"I'm going to find him even if it means I have to fish him out of a latrine with my own bare hands."

I was gifted this name by my beloved parents, I thought, *and by hook or by crook, you will receive your due for abusing it so, you thieving scoundrel.* I funneled my anger into a nice, kind smile and took another puff on my pipe.

Etan's squeak of fear told me that perhaps I hadn't quite erased all traces of rage from my face. He took two steps back in shock. *Did I really look so terrifying right now?*

"Putting aside punishment for now," Margit said, "how do you expect to find him? Even I can't trek around all of Ende Erde for you to find one single person."

"Don't worry; for Plans A through F, you shouldn't have to lift so much as a tarsus on one of your sweet little legs. My little chance meeting earlier might have been for the best after all."

I propped my hands up behind my head like they were cat ears. I had many ways of finding someone—many a string to pull (old and new alike), and many a spell to weave—but I thought that this was perhaps the perfect trial run for our new feline friend to prove her worth to us.

[Tips] In the Empire, people have to rely on their memories—or if they're lucky, portraits—of people in order to keep track of their identifying features. If a child leaves a family for many years, it's no great challenge for someone with a little improvisational skill and few scruples to usurp that child's place. Many a swindler has made their fortune on the backs of a grieving family. Others tend to imitate famous figures in contemporary songs to steal their exploits.

In Erich's old world, older men and women are often targeted by scam callers who claim to be in dire need of money and beg their "grandparents" to wire them large sums to bail them out.

Living in this world made me realize how difficult it must have been to commit crimes back in modern-day Japan.

"P-Please! Let me go!"

After all, there were CCTV cameras wherever you went, most cars had dash cams, and all forms of long-distance transportation had security. The police couldn't be underestimated either, as they could use cameras on shops and homes to lock eyes on a sucker even if they didn't have visuals on the actual

scene. Anonymity kept you *alive* if the law had it out for you, and in my old world, that was a rapidly dwindling resource for most folks.

"I-I beg you! L-Lemme go! I'm sorry, okay?!"

"Yes, yes; stop moving or you'll make me mess up."

There, you had to weave past an ever-tightening web of camera sight lines and facial recognition algorithms if you wanted to get away with *anything*. It made things safer for those on the straight and narrow—folks didn't go missing nearly so often, and the most egregious wrongdoers never passed without detection.

I supposed the most common way of pegging a criminal in the Empire was through sketched wanted posters. These were far from flawless. The artist's own interpretation and the witnesses' foggy memory made the end product always a few steps away from the real thing.

"I'm begging you! Don't kill me!"

"I'm not going to kill you."

You couldn't count on human wave tactics to flush out a random stranger; unless your target had some particular identifying feature, you would be pretty hard-pressed to hunt them down once they had escaped from your local jurisdiction. There had been cases in the past where idiots had been caught because they'd run back to their hometowns out of some bout of homesickness or had come back simply because things hadn't worked out abroad.

It was only in the previous century that countries started working together to exchange criminals on an international basis back on Earth—that should illustrate just how much distance could get you in this world.

If you wanted to really make sure your escape was flawless, you could use magic or miracles to cover your tracks, but if you were only a small-time crook, you would have to fork over a lot of cash to get a pro to do it for you. That transaction itself would hinge entirely on trust. If you didn't know dick about magic, you had no safe way to verify if that sort of spell had actually worked. Of course, if it *did*, then eventually the residual mana would vanish, and the people tracking you might use their limited information to pin down the wrong person,

and you would be off scot-free. All the same, any sort of escape came with its own share of issues.

Although many routes were open to you, there was no such thing as a perfect escape, and that was the sort of thing that *stuck* with you.

"I'd hate to pick up a reputation as the sort of guy who'd kill a fellow in a fit of pique, even if they *are* a low-life swindler."

There were some real pros out there, folks who could Always Get Their Man. These were prototypes for the classical Great Detective—masters of legwork, logic, and forensics; scholars of the human soul and all its unbidden demands; true diviners, capable of finding their mark without a drop of mana. Lately I'd hired one such genius.

"The water's nice and hot now."

"Thank you kindly, Margit."

"Help! Heeelp! What the hell are you gonna do to me?!"

You might have noticed a certain someone interrupting my little internal monologue. Schnee had bagged this wretched little viper in a scant five days. She had kept her methods secret—she had to protect her livelihood, after all—but she'd told me that she had spotted a certain blond-haired individual splashing out with his big blowout in a nearby town of about eight hundred residents. I took my terrified clan members with me, rounded him up, and dragged him back to Marsheim.

Schnee was the real deal. She had sketched up a likeness and had found his little hideout in record speed. I was amazed by her efficiency and grateful for how easy she was to work with.

"Come now, I said I wouldn't kill you! We're performing a little public display."

We were gathered in Adrian Imperial Plaza. It was the middle of the day, and the sun was shining merrily over the nearby garden of the Adventurer's Association. Already a crowd had begun to gather, wondering what was happening, but I was in no danger of the guards shutting this thing down. After all, I'd made sure to get explicit permission to conduct this little public

punishment.

An adventurer's name was all they had. The Association, who worked with us, would also suffer if their day laborers were unfairly slandered and had copycats dragging their names through the mud. If they didn't take their own responsibility in matters like this, then it would be bad for business. I was given permission to clear my name and take the measures I deemed necessary, as long as I didn't kill him—such was the agreement I had signed.

In a way, the Association liked keeping its hands out of adventurers' affairs. The only punishment for inter-adventurer fighting was a monetary fee because they didn't want to bother with any unnecessary paperwork. That way adventurers could duke it out, solve their argument, and pay up, and everyone could move on. This was the method with the least amount of admin.

The Empire of Rhine was a massive country, but at times it behaved like a lazy, tiny state.

At any rate, what I was performing today was not an execution, but it *was* a public show to humiliate this swindler and teach him to *never* mess with adventurers again. A slap on the wrist wouldn't be enough—he needed to really feel sorry.

"All right, Etan, Mathieu—hold him still."

"Stop! STOOOP!"

I wasn't planning on brutalizing his body or anything, so I had bound him to a stretcher. All the same, *man*, did he like to squirm. He was like a fish gasping for the sea, but with no hope of ever returning to the water. *Sorry pal, you're being dropped right into the pot.*

I sprinkled a certain special powder over the fool's head while my two rookies kept him steady and sloshed the bucket of hot water over him. I kneaded the powder into his hair and then gave it a nice tug. It came off in a nice clean motion like a weed from the ground, leaving a shiny, bald head in its place.

"Gwaaagh!" the fool shouted.

A ripple of murmurs went across the crowd. Many of the people in attendance, subconsciously or not, grabbed at their own hair or hats.

“Ew...”

“That’s not a pretty sight.”

“H-His whole head of hair came off! Is he gonna be bald forever?”

“N-No way...”

Adventurers often worked up a sweat and found themselves wearing helmets. All the same, many people valued their hair and tried to maintain it, despite the circumstances.

“Wow! It came clean off, just like you said!” I said, with wonder.

“K-Kaya, how could you create something so cruel?” Siegfried said, his voice trembling.

“It is easier to destroy than it is to create. That’s a universal lesson you should keep in mind, Dee,” Kaya replied.

The powder I had applied was Kaya’s very own brand of depilatory cream. Of course, I hadn’t requested she make it for today *specifically*. Both men and women in the Empire viewed themselves as civilized, and as such worked to remove excess hair. Whereas some people used scrubs at the baths or went to specialists, Kaya had concocted her own formula. I had bought a bottle from her, and it really made hair removal such a breeze. Sprinkle it on and add hot water, and you’re silky smooth.

Kaya’s own variety was designed to not activate unless it was energized by hot water, and so even though we had been splashed by the bubbles, the fact that we were still dry meant that every hair on our own heads was nice and safe.

There weren’t any ways to speed up hair growth in this world that I knew of.

“What did you do?! Let me go! PLEEEASE!”

“Yes, yes, enough whining. This is what you deserve. I hope you’ll be learning your lesson.”

By stepping up as the first one to use my name for illicit ends, this crook had become an example for others. Punishing one person to dissuade one hundred others was a common principle. Of course, killing was off the table—it made *me*

look bad—so this had been the best way I could devise to demonstrate what would come of crossing Goldilocks Erich.

Seeing as this man had used my hair to run his con, well, clearly he didn't deserve it anymore. It was a little bit medieval—that attitude of chopping off a guy's hand to make sure he couldn't steal again—but I was being positively generous. Hair grew back. Limbs did not. Kaya's potion was completely natural, so you could say I was as kind as a Bodhisattva.

"Enough whining. I'm not a devil! I've left your eyebrows intact."

"WHAT?! You're evil! I-I admit that I pretended to be you, but I didn't steal *your* money, did I?!"

"Backchat *and* trying to refute the crime? Sorry, but it looks like you haven't learned your lesson."

"Huh?!"

Just so you get the necessary context here, people who were bald—unless it was due to natural reasons—were treated a little bit like social outcasts. Some regions even shaved people's heads as punishment and a physical marker of what they had done.

Unfortunately being a skinhead only suited a slim subset of people. Mister Hansel's head was carefully shaved, so it looked pretty cool in all honesty, but voluntary baldness was so rare that he had become famous for it, just like Archbishop Lempel "the Bald" had in the past.

I had prepared phase two depending on how sorry he acted; his troublesome attitude indicated that he wouldn't just get away with a bald head today.

"Siegfried, get the rope."

"Really? We seriously gonna do this?"

The scene's gruesome already, I know, but you can't be soft with someone who's not willing to learn from their mistakes, Sieg. If I became known as the guy who let off one person who had abused my name, then I would get a flood of copycats in the near future. I was totally on the side of cruel and unusual punishment, so long as it actually *functioned as a deterrent* and didn't breach

into endangering someone's life.

Not only that, I was certain he was our guy. He had tried to dash off as soon as he had seen me, and in a totally pain-free questioning he'd fessed up to everything he had done. He wasn't making up a story to get free either—it matched up with Guido's account. So now I needed to see this thing to the end. I needed to let all of Ende Erde know that I was one person not to mess with. *Again.*

"Ooh, it's *so* smooth. Your head's like a boiled egg," I said.

"Don't say that, man," Siegfried said as he handed me the rope. "I won't be able to eat eggs for days..."

"My hair! MY HAIR!"

I had used the rest of the water to wash away the remaining suds and the straggling hair. His bald head was on display to everyone. It didn't have that bluish pallor that a buzz cut gave—after all, his hair had been removed from the root.

Kaya really did cook up something amazing. Could she rework it for plucking chickens, maybe? It could really streamline cooking, I considered talking to her later about selling on the patent... *Waaait; hold on a second,* I thought, catching myself. This stuff was way too powerful for everyone to get their hands on it. Someone might slather it onto the head of their enemy. For some, a social death from having their looks ruined was worse than actual death.

"All right, it's time. Hang 'im, boys!"

"You really are a coldhearted guy..." Siegfried muttered.

Despite Siegfried's grumblings, I was the one who had been wronged, and so I hung this baldy upside down on a magical streetlamp with a sign that said, "I am a huge bastard who impersonates others."

"Come on, comrade. Imagine if someone used *your* good name to steal an old man's money and then have his way with a poor young woman. Imagine the pointed fingers as people gradually thought worse and worse of you."

"Ugh, yeah, I'd probably stab the guy, it's true. I think what you're doing is

crueler than that, to be honest."

I wasn't an unfairly cruel man. People could only stay in this position for around two hours or so—any longer and the blood rushing to his head might injure or kill him. I would leave him up there for around ten minutes, and if he still hadn't learned his lesson, then I would give him a nice slow rotation for a minuscule break before putting his feet up in the air again for ten more. I'd make sure to check in on him for as long as he remained unrepentant.

Ironically kindness was the one thing that could screw this whole thing over. A famous koi fish-loving swordsman emphasized the importance of the *message* that an act carried.

"Killing is no good, Sieg. That will make *me* look bad. We need to make sure the people watching can laugh at this guy's hubris, not scowl at our cruelty. Go too far and we'll make the Fellowship of the Blade seem cruel and unfair."

I was a far kinder soul than the people I had taken inspiration from. He would have no long-lasting injuries, no deformities—just a bald head that would grow back. He'd just have to keep a low profile for a while. If he wanted, he could head to a territory or two over and start a new life in a town where no one knew his name. There were no social media or photographs here—it was easy to do. Even with this show, it wouldn't earn even half the long-lasting influence that Fidelio's night of righteous ruin had. All the same, it would stop anyone doing what this bald fool had done.

"If I was him, I'd probably slit my own throat out of shame," Siegfried went on, looking at the strung-up man.

"People like him don't have the guts to do that. He's a swindler, a smooth talker—someone who avoids responsibility. But chill out. Just watch the show, okay?"

I was a bit concerned that some of the people watching were looking at him with a dash more concern than mockery—it seemed different from the veritable jeering that I heard happened at public executions—but it paled in comparison to the satisfaction I felt at a job well done.

"Good work," I said to Schnee.

“Criminy... Spotted me again? How long this time?”

The white-furred bubastisian had come to appraise the fruits of her labor; I could see her ears flatten in despondence after I called out to her.

“I must say, I’m rather impressed by her,” Margit whispered into my ear.

A compliment from Margit meant that my beautiful scout thought that Schnee’s abilities to vanish into the air or a crowd might be better than her own. Schnee had her own racial bonuses to benefit from—bubastisians were as slinky as their cat counterparts. Many of them tended to be flighty or easily bored, so people often forgot that they were skilled hunters.

“What in the—?! When did you get here?!” Siegfried said, taking a step back. “Your fur’s so white... Man, you’ve got skills to just vanish like that when you should be the most visible one here.”

“I stand out like a sore thumb when it’s dark though! Hee hee, I’m absolutely gassed to be gettin’ to work with ya too, Mister Second-in-command.”

The bubastisian swished her tail as she took in the tonally disparate scene of Kaya kindly explaining to Sieg what “gassed” meant and an upside-down bald man shouting curses at me.

“I gotta say, Erich, you think of the funniest darn things.”

“I thought putting on a show was better than being paid back in blood. I do wonder how long he’ll keep yelling that he’ll have my guts for garters...”

“I s’pose he’ll last a good ol’ half hour? He was a small fry, almost not worth chasin’ down,” Schnee said with a sigh.

She was right, of course. He was a two-bit crook who had committed a string of small-time crimes aside from perjury. He even had a criminal brand from another region. When Schnee had brought me her notes on him, she wondered what I stood to gain from hunting down someone as small-time as him.

In my eyes, he was the perfect example for me to make. If he was a shark, not a minnow, he wouldn’t be so easy to cook up. If someone from a dangerous organization or some noble family had been the one impersonating me, then I would have had to have changed tack. This whole public rigmarole stank just a

bit too much of adventurer.

He worked alone, and that meant I didn't have to worry about him calling in the cavalry on me. All he could do was scream that he would kill me, knowing full well he'd never pull it off. I would be safe, but I did feel a bit sorry for other follicularly challenged people who looked like *him* who might be mistaken for a philanderer. It was a good thing there were so few bald people, I supposed.

"It was a twitchin' in my whiskers that got me to talk to ya, but I gotta say, it looks like I should trust in our great ancestor more."

From what I knew, bubastisians originated from a divine country in the southern continent that once possessed great power but had lost it by the current era. There was a cat god from this nation that still wielded considerable clout, and many theologians supposed that the cat lords that made their home across the Empire were related—perhaps lower-level divine beings that had broken away from that pantheon.

At any rate, bubastisians had good instincts.

"I ain't sure which of my nine lives I'm on now, but I bet I scored some points workin' with ya."

Their religious beliefs and attitudes toward life and death were more complex than our own. They could communicate with intelligent cats and regarded them as their fellows. Bubastisians believed that there was a chance of being reborn as a cat lord after their reincarnation into their ninth life. This wasn't some sort of codified belief system; it was more one of those beliefs that gets ingrained in people on a molecular level.

I wasn't the type of person to sniff at folk beliefs. Seeing the cat lord's acorn sprout seconds after dropping into the ground on that barren mountain in Zeufar, I made sure to keep an open mind. I wondered now if their god had a paw upon the loom of my fate.

"I know you were looking for work as much as I was looking for an informant. What do you think? Do I cut the mustard as your employer?" I asked.

"I can't stop grinnin' at this whole spectacle. You're more than interestin' enough. What I wanna hear is if yer satisfied with my work."

“I believe I showed my satisfaction through more material means.”

As I said this, Schnee began to twitch in a particular manner. She wasn’t in pain or anything—this was a uniquely bubastisian way of laughing. Many of their race found it difficult to speak in Imperial standard, and even those who were comfortable with our language still didn’t use their vocal cords when laughing. Shymar was a native Rhinian speaker, so she laughed like we did, but Adham laughed like Schnee did.

“Ya got me there. Ain’t a cat in the world y’could pay off in shiny coins, but a gal’s gotta pay for her dinner. Thank ya kindly, Erich.”

Evidently satisfied, Schnee raised her tail as she slipped into the crowd and out of sight. It was like watching a fog dissipate into nothing.

“She’s difficult to hold on to, isn’t she? Catlike in more ways than one,” Margit said.

“Agreed. She’s nothing like Shymar.”

“I wonder if Schnee is more typically bubastisian...”

Everyone was different. It was a simple fact of the world. Not every Rhinian was an efficiency-obsessed, humorless anal-retentive. Not everyone from the isles were rowdy meat-lovers. Not everyone from Seine was obsessed with the material joys of the world.

“You absolute BASTARD! Your head is mine! I’ll decorate your grave with your guts!”

What did they say back in my old world? “The wheels of justice grind slow but exceedingly fine”? I satisfied myself with the steadily diminishing vigor of the fool’s shouts as they rang through Imperial Adrian Plaza.

From what I could tell, from this day onward, no one else dared to pretend to be Goldilocks Erich ever again. *Very good. As they said, “The cat’s in her sunbeam, all’s right with the world”...*

[Tips] Bubastisians have a religious belief based around nine lives—a tradition that is most likely based on broader cat folklore.

If a cat's soul has managed to accrue enough virtuous deeds through eight lives, then it is said they will attain enlightenment upon their ninth life and be reborn as a god. Despite the size and shape difference, bubastisians regard cats as their fellows and describe death as "changing coats." Such ideas of reincarnation are rare in the Empire.

Late Summer of the Sixteenth Year

Public Enemies

In sword and sorcery fantasy settings, there are many known threats to the world, not limited to ancient cave-dwelling dragons, evil gods plotting doomsday, and furious races wanting to bring annihilation to all of humankind. Localized versions of these threats are known as “public enemies”—foes that affect the lives of villages, towns, or small settlements. These enemies need to be cleared out first if adventurers wish to have a clean, safe place of residence.

There was a stereotype back in my old world that dogs care about their owners, whereas cats only care about their homes.

“Got the reports for you, boss.”

“Thank you kindly, Mathieu.”

Technically Mathieu was a werewolf, not a dog, but he fit the idiom to a tee. When I saw his tail swish in absolute joy at being praised—I heard that werewolves were bad at masking their emotions through their tails—I couldn’t help but smile.

It had been a little while since I had shown the world what would come of trying to play silly buggers with my name and face; the dry summer season was just about drawing to a close. We had slowly solidified our places here at the Snowy Silverwolf, but for some reason people still found it hard to approach our little table at the back of the room. I would have been happier if another group of our peers had come to say hello, to be honest.

“So, how was the job?” I asked my clanmate.

“They weren’t expecting real adventurers to show up, so the assholes scattered like bugs when you turn their rock over.”

Moving on from my less than sociable showing with that asshole, our little

clan had actually seen an influx of new blood; we had more than ten members in our official roster now. Considering that this number was only a fourth of total sign-ups who'd passed the background checks but washed out during training, our current lineup was pretty well honed.

With our larger roster and Schnee's information gathering, we were pulling in a wider variety of jobs while avoiding the duds. We were making a name for ourselves as a clan of upright, capable adventurers.

Mathieu, who was still laughing at the memory, had gone with some of our other members to kick out a group of layabouts from a tavern they were haunting. The gig was simple in concept, difficult in execution.

The group in question was a pack of local lowlifes. Their rep carried them in their little corner, but no further—not quite an actual criminal organization, but more than nuisances. All the same, they must have had an idiot with ambitions calling the shots. They'd ended up recruiting the son of a local well-off family and were using him to squeeze them for cash. It was a timeworn tactic. The son in question was the ideal mark. The kid had a pretty direct line to the family's collective purse, but he wasn't in line to take up the reins and didn't have the backbone to push back when his buddies decided to lean on him for a handout.

Although the family had decided that their idiot son wouldn't be taking over the family, they were too fond of him to cut off relations completely. And so his father—a hardworking tavern owner—came to us to help get these thugs off his son's back.

It had played out just as simply as Mathieu had summed it up. I'd put together a little team—him, Etan, and our other two scariest-looking Fellows—to push back a little, and that idiot son's "friends" ran off without even *trying* to put up a fight. I'd warned my guys to play it safe, but it seemed like my worries had been completely unfounded.

"It's because of your rep and your own glory, boss! They ran for the hills as soon as they saw our emblem."

"It's because *you* guys have worked to become worthy warriors. Be proud of yourselves first, got it?"

"Thank ya, boss!"

Mathieu tapped the burnished wood of the clasp on his cloak, gleaming with an equally radiant smile. Looking at him now, I doubted that most people would believe me if I told them what he'd looked like just a few months ago.

With a developed bathhouse routine, his fur had taken on a healthy sheen. His shirt, which could barely contain his rippling muscles, was clean and free of frays or holes. He had started taking occasional trips to the barber, and his mane was well taken care of. His appearance wasn't the only thing he'd brushed up on; although he hadn't picked up any palatial speech, his basic enunciation and etiquette had improved by an order of magnitude. He had the powerful aura of someone whose livelihood was dictated by battle, but it wasn't overbearing. He might have been rough around the edges, but he had a good heart within.

The clasp that he had fondly patted just now was the one we had made back in that countryside canton—the symbol of our clan: a wolf with a sword in its jaws. It was a simple thing—a piece of wood that hooked shut to keep your cloak firmly affixed. I only gave them to the members of my clan that I deemed worthy of heading into a real battle. They only gleamed gold due to the choice of wood and the varnish I'd used, but I felt an awkward kind of happiness seeing Mathieu prize it so highly.

"Oh, right. Did you remember to warn them?" I asked.

"Course I did! Told them that if any of them turned up within two blocks of that house or anyone *dared* talk to the young master again, I'd ask them to show me what they're really made of. They learned their lesson, boss."

Great work, Mathieu. This wasn't just a spat between kids. We needed to make sure our little thugs didn't dare make the same mistakes again.

Everyone had been briefed on the gang's roster, so our presence would be deterrent enough. That went doubly when they knew that we had their addresses, hideouts, names of their family, et cetera. Well, I honestly hoped that they would. It would be fine, right? Surely? *Ugh, now I'm getting worried.* The problem with idiots was that they had an uncanny way of surpassing your expectations. They enjoyed picking fights they couldn't win or making ploys that only put them into the red. When I saw some of the news reports about

rebellious kids in my old world, I often wondered if we really were the same species or not.

I was considering that it might do them good if I put in a little overtime to pay them a little midnight visit. Unless I really drove the point home, those goons might pop up again like resilient weeds. Everyone could have been better off if they'd been driven out of town... This was why I preferred bandits over thugs; you could destroy your average bandit operation root and branch, but these folks were technically members of civil society. You couldn't just put them in the ground and take some comfort in the certainty they wouldn't hurt anyone ever again. I made a mental note to at least go check in on them periodically to see if they'd made any progress reforming.

"But man... The world's a pretty confusing place," Mathieu said.

"What do you mean by that?"

"I just don't get why he did it. That kid's so lucky! He's got a good family. They paid to send him to private school. So why's he messin' around with some local punks? Yeah, maybe he ain't gonna be the new family head, but he coulda gotten a job anywhere in Marsheim."

The kid was your textbook spoiled brat who couldn't recognize the silver spoon in his mouth. Mathieu came from a pack of roaming hunters. He'd never had a fixed address or the kind of stability society's mid-to-upper crust had, so his confusion was warranted. The world wasn't so simple. Everyone had their own way of viewing things, and there was always going to be at least one person who would raise an eyebrow at your way of life.

We were the ones people couldn't fathom. We picked up swords and rushed into the fray, not for the glory of battle, but for the *thrill* of it. It would be dangerous for any of us to forget that we were a motley crew of fools chasing our next adrenaline high—stuck in a waking dream. The moment we lost sight of the utter craziness of what it was we did would be the moment we'd be lost adrift forever, untethered entirely from consensus reality.

"Well, everyone's different," I simply said. "Don't you think so too, Schnee?"

"Hee hee! Spotted me again..."

“What in the—?!”

From Mathieu’s shadow came a slinking white-furred bubastisian. Her pink nose was glistening. Clearly she was in a good mood.

I was a real cat lover. Their noses in particular always charmed me. It was something to do with how cold the skin of a cat’s nose was relative to its fur, and the faint suction you could feel from each breath in when you held a finger to it. It was a really unique sensation. It made me think of my old cat at my parents’ place. I loved tickling his nose and getting finger licks in retaliation.

“When’d you get here?” Mathieu said, nonplussed.

“She’s been here for a bit now,” I replied. “She followed you in, actually. She was just hiding in your shadow, staying out of sight.”

“Spotted me since I came in, did ya? Can’t get one over on you, that’s for sure...”

I was impressed as ever at her ability to pass without trace. That she had fooled a werewolf’s sense of smell, all while silently shadowing him, was quite the feat.

Schnee must have been out sleuthing somewhere because she wasn’t in her usual clothes. No, tonight she was in a maid outfit.

You heard me. Cat girl. Maid outfit.

What was up with her and her calculating mind? Had she come to explode my brain? Had she done some elite-level digging and found out that I liked this kind of stuff? I’d *never* told a single soul since coming to this world. How would she have found out? I’d never gone down the super perverted route of buying clothes for Margit and asking her to try them on “come on, just once” for me. Between the critical hit to my composure and my total bafflement, I was left fighting to keep a straight face.

“Grh, bubastisians have really faint scents,” Mathieu grumbled.

“Nee hee, that there’s a trade secret, Mr. Werewolf.”

And with a cute accent to boot, I thought as Schnee walked around Mathieu and sat down—it was clear she had something to discuss.

“Hey, Mathieu? You can go out drinking in other places every now and then, you know? Might be good to make some new connections and see a bit more of Marsheim.”

I thanked my clan member for his hard work and gave him a little purse. Our client hadn’t settled up yet, but payment in my clan was given in advance, and *no*, I did not take a cut. I took in all of our earnings, settled the various expenses we had, and paid everyone an equal amount. Like I said before, I might have been acting like the boss of a temp agency, but I was an adventurer first and foremost.

“You sure?”

“Of course. I got the reports from you, so I’ll make sure everything is settled moneywise. You’re happy with a forward payment, right?”

“Yeah! Thanks, boss!”

Mathieu took the money and headed out with a skip in his step. I imagined he was heading straight to his other Fellows on the job, ready to invite them out for a congratulatory drink.

Your typical adventurer had a bawdy streak, and the Snowy Silverwolf had its share of barmaids who were easy on the eye, but it wasn’t the sort of rowdy place where Mister John allowed his customers to hit on his staff. This came partially from his desire, as a veteran in the business, to defer rookies from foolishly wasting their money; there were plenty of other places in Marsheim to pursue more carnal pleasures, and he’d happily point his customers to them if they insisted. He also knew that no good came of adventurers trying to make a move on fellow adventurers. Who knew whose clan you might accidentally offend? It was all too easy to start interclan strife and so this decision was ultimately a way of maintaining the peace.

“Whew, town’s gonna be a little bit safer after today,” Schnee said as she watched the werewolf walk off. Her tail was stick straight—clearly she was enjoying herself.

“Are you sure you’re happy with the price?” I asked.

“Don’tcha worry about it. That tavern’s been around since I was but a kitten.

They don't water down their booze, so it helps me out to have it all sorted out."

Despite the fact that this job required a gentle touch I couldn't trust my rookies to bring to it and the fact that it was helping keep Marsheim safe, fifty librae wasn't all that big of a payout. If you always splashed out on intel for every job like this, your clan would quickly find itself deep in the red. Schnee kindly offered to do her part for a mere five librae out of the goodness of her heart.

This gig didn't deal with real dyed-in-the-wool crooks, and so if it had been my decision and my fee, I wouldn't be happy with less than ten librae. But Schnee had her own personal rulebook when it came to her work, and so she often cut her fees substantially for the really prosocial gigs. I almost wanted to raise an eyebrow in suspicion at her kindness.

"Would you like a drink?"

"Oh! You spottin' me?"

"Well, we're sitting at a drinking establishment. You need to buy *something* while you're out, or Mister John'll paint a target on both our backs."

"Then gladly."

I ordered Schnee a mug of sheep's milk and wine for me. Something must have been on her mind, because she didn't make small talk with me or ask me why I wasn't trying to strike up my own. Before long, slumped over the table, she twitched her ears twice and began to mutter, more to some imagined audience than to me.

"I'm the sorta person who can't get to sleep unless I'm somewhere that's taken my fancy. I got a few places that tick all the boxes. I love sleepin' in the same place more than once, and high places really do it fer me. There ain't nothin' better than hearin' the pitter-patter of the rain up from the tower of the Night Goddess's church."

Her tastes were catlike too. Most humanfolk preferred beds, but most furred demihumans could sleep anywhere. I supposed it was mensch who were the odd ones out for not liking to sleep up in trees despite once doing so in the distant past of our simian evolution.

Similar to cats, bubastisians enjoyed frequent light naps. I would sometimes see Shymar snoozing on the roof and such, and I always wondered how she didn't wake up with just *brutal* aches and pains.

"That's why I like it here. No one can sleep if their bedroom's full of clutter and rabble, ya get me? I wanna clean up where I live so I can sleep in peace."

Schnee's head rested on her front paws; her golden eyes gazed off into the middle distance. As she spoke, a satisfied expression came over her. With a quick yawn and a stretch of her lower body, I felt an almost irrepressible urge to give her a scratch behind the ears.

"Heh. I just can't reckon why some folks wander all their days. How can anyone not just find a coupla good hidey-holes for their forty winks and hunker down for good? I love Marsheim. I figure, when my time comes to change coats, I'll come right back."

I felt the same pang of sympathetic joy I'd had with Mathieu all over again. So *this* was how Schnee could justify charging such magnanimous rates. These two really were perfect exemplars of that idiom from my old world.

"So don't you be worryin' about it. We both chose Marsheim, so let's get along, y'hear?"

"All right, I understand. I'm more than happy with the arrangement."

The waitress placed our drinks in front of us. My wine was served as I liked it —not watered down, as was the trend among some people, and with a drop of honey. Schnee's milk was served in a shallow bowl to make it easier for her to drink.

As I held out my cup to celebrate the discovery of our shared interest, Schnee met it with her own; they made a satisfying *clunk*. After a sip, she handed over two slips of paper.

"I picked up a coupla fishy soundin' scraps, if it suits ya. I sniffed 'em out on a stroll lookin' for a nice nap spot, so I'll give ya a good price!"

"Two new rumors, eh... How's twenty-five sound?"

"Ya serious? Forty would be nice..."

“Forty, then.”

I wouldn’t try and haggle for decent intel. I handed over a purse of silver, but Schnee just looked at it with a bewildered expression.

“Ya got no vim when it comes to barterin’, do ya...?”

“I’ve always been of the opinion that I should buy a product based on the merchant’s honest valuation.”

Kansai natives were known for loving a good bit of haggling, but I never liked painting a whole group with a single brush. I might have been Kansai-born and bred in a previous life, but one thing that I took with me into this life was a trust in the people I bought from to offer the price that was most reasonable to them. If I paid too little I felt an anxiety I couldn’t tamp down that I was ripping them off and causing them trouble when I could feasibly pay more.

“You’re a real... Fine, fine, let’s do thirty.”

“Sure? All right then.”

I took the purse, removed ten librae, and handed it back to her. I then turned my attention to the papers. As I read through the first sheet, I couldn’t help but furrow my brow in confusion. It detailed one of the Kykeon dealers’ meeting places.

“Quite the stroll you had...” I murmured.

“It’s a big job to find a good roster of nappin’ spots.”

Schnee brushed it off as if it were nothing, but in all honesty it was quite the feat to sniff out a base that supplied over thirty dealers. If it could just be found by chance on a walk, then I doubted the Baldur Clan would be stressing as much as they were right now. They had apprehended and tried to interrogate a few of the less subtle dealers, to little effect.

The hideout that Schnee had pointed out to me was a building situated on a corner of the sewage network in the south of Marsheim, near the city walls. It was an area of the network that hadn’t yet been converted into an underground system, earning it a charming moniker: the Great Stink Heap. Despite housing some of the city’s least wanted, the infrastructure was

shockingly sound. In short, it was the perfect spot to carry out your dirty work without the fuzz bearing down on you.

Despite the note's dearth of details on the building's interior, I was impressed by her sketches of not only the building's layout and position, but also its full breakdown of all the windows and formal entrances and exits. The scribbled shorthand laid out exactly how many crates had been brought in, how many people had come and gone, and even descriptions of the bodyguards she had seen in the moments that the door had opened. She had outdone herself, really.

The head honcho behind all this had a talent for illicit trade. They changed their base with relative speed, so we needed to make our raid in two, three, or absolute latest, four days from now. We hadn't had the most practice in indoor battles, but with Kaya's tear gas and flash-bang potions leading the charge, I was sure it wouldn't be too tricky a job. The only issue was the fact that it was a three-story building. We would need to make sure we had subdued everyone inside.

Siegfried was due to show up at the Snowy Silverwolf before long; I would discuss the matter with him, Kaya, and Margit. We needed to put everything else on temporary hold and crush this base with all our might.

As I pushed down my growing desire for the fight, I looked at the second paper. My heart skipped a beat. It was a tally of "business expenses" accrued by a few of my clan members elsewhere.

"Those *idiots*..." I grumbled.

Three of my clan members had racked up quite the tab at various establishments around Marsheim. I didn't mind that they were having fun and blowing off steam. Sure, the Fellowship had set them up with a decent stream of gigs that buoyed them financially where your average soot-black adventurer would be barely scraping by, but they still weren't flush with cash; it was natural to owe one or two tabs. The problem came in the *scale* of the matter.

Just a few days ago I had given three of my new recruits their clan badges, and they had *immediately* headed to the pleasure quarter and leveraged our clan's good name for some free fun. Some of these bills were to the tune of

twenty-five librae. This was a whole month of ruby-red bodyguard work—an amount that you just couldn't reach with regular daily expenses. People who got up to this sort of thing—day laborers who espoused that any next job could be their last and so racked up tabs they didn't want to pay—tended to go unpunished because by the time they attempted it, their clan was usually already big enough to cover the costs.

I wasn't sure how ill-intentioned my members were being, but the bills from the establishments they had swindled, accidentally or otherwise, were plain for everyone to see.

"Gods dammit... I thought I drilled it into them to *not* go around using our clan for clout..."

"Naw, don't get so hot-headed. It ain't the squeakiest clean of jobs, and it's not like they've been out gamblin'."

The names belonged to three honest and hardworking Fellows; in all honesty I doubted that they moseyed on into these places with their clan memberships at the ready. This belief didn't come from me overestimating my people, nor did it come from a desire to see the best in people—it was what Schnee had written in her report. She had proved plenty trustworthy until now, so this was probably legit too.

It most likely had come of a momentary bout of recklessness. It wasn't like taking out a loan or anything—just a little verbal agreement between two parties. All the same, I didn't want favors like this being misused. If someone came by brandishing a gussied-up bill with spurious interest tacked on, or if someone managed to get one over on our clan because of a debt, then no one would be laughing. I would need to make sure this didn't happen again...

"Oho, *scary.*"

"My apologies."

What was *wrong* with me? I might have been in my familiar haunt, but I had to keep a lid on my emotions in public. *Calm down, Erich...* My clan was filled with people around the same age as me—youths in the most rash period of their lives. They were bound to make mistakes and spend more than their remit once or twice in their lives.

I should have been glad that all I got was a bill, not a big black stain on the clan's reputation. It wasn't a great situation, but it wasn't the worst.

Perhaps someone was trying to sow the seeds of discord in our clan. I had given our supposed mole free rein since Schnee had first told me about them. Who knew—perhaps they were trying to indicate that our rookies' shallow pockets were their weakness...

I decided to let myself be satisfied that I had been informed about this bill while it was still an amount that our rookies could pay off with their own hard work. If I allowed myself to spiral into the negatives of the matter, then my mood would only deteriorate.

"Hey, what're you doin' barin' your fangs for everyone to see? Idiot..."

"Oh, hey, Siegfried. Hm? Where's Kaya?"

"She's busy workin' on some potion. She said she needs to concentrate, so I'm buyin' dinner for the both of us."

True to his name, Siegfried the Lucky always showed up just when I needed him. Schnee's report had convinced me that we needed to set some far firmer ground rules for the whole clan to guarantee we were all on the same page. Most of the clan looked up to Siegfried, our second-in-command, and so it would be foolish of me not to include him in whipping up some snappy, meaningful rules.

You might have been wondering why I hadn't tagged in Margit to help, but she had little interest in the management side of things. When I had asked her about it before, she had told me that I'd chosen to form the clan, so I was obliged to lead and manage it. She helped with some of the more concrete chores and with educating our rookies, of course, but she acted as if she wanted to keep her presence in the Fellowship of the Blade as shallow as possible.

It was therefore a more prudent choice to get "Big Bro Siegfried" (as most of the rookies called him now) to give his insight and opinion.

"Ugh, now look at the face you're pullin'... I walked into here at just the wrong time, didn't I?"

“Come on now, Sieg! Take a seat. I’ll pay for the food.”

“What a drag... What is it this time? Etan and Mathieu had another brawl? Karsten flip out at another rookie callin’ him ‘shorty’? How come I’m always the go-between, huh?”

As Siegfried sat down, Schnee stood up with all the smoothness in the world, completely undetected by my comrade. She gave me a cheeky grin and a wave with both hands—she had no interest in this side of business.

I really am grateful for all of your intel, I thought. *So don’t worry—I won’t ask this kind of stuff of you. Just let me know when you have something new to tell me.*

“C’mon, spill it. We’ve been just doin’ boring jobs around town instead of anything exciting, so I hope it ain’t about people grumblin’ about that.”

“Sorry about that, Sieg. But trouble in Marsheim means trouble for us, so I hope you don’t mind listening to what I’ve got to say.”

Unfortunately we still hadn’t received the kind of jobs that would really get Siegfried’s heart pumping—the type that would put him into the annals of history like recovering the Slayer of the Foul Drake’s legendary sword Windslaught. But making sure our clan was strong and healthy was a necessary paving stone on the path toward such great adventures.

We already had proof of that in Fidelio. He had worked on sorting out various local jobs, and not long after, requests for grand adventures practically piled up at his front door thanks to the public’s certainty that he was the best man for the job. *Don’t forget the grind, my friend.*

“I think we need some clan rules,” I said.

“And you’re asking *me* for help?!”

Even if not all of our clan members could read and write easily, I thought it was important for us to have some properly codified rules. Other clans usually ran via the mantra that the boss’s word was law and handed down rulings on a case by case basis. However, I thought it would be simplest and most efficient if we could come to an agreement on a shared goal and the rules we needed to follow to achieve it. Otherwise we weren’t a clan anymore—just a gaggle of

rough and ready adventurers.

“Siegfried, you’re putting in the hours to learn to read and write, aren’t you? Kaya complimented you the other day, saying you can write your own name with real finesse, and that you’ve got simple addition and subtraction down too.”

“Huh? Sh-She said that...?”

You can’t hide your embarrassment from me, Sieg! You may put on a spiky front, but I can totally see how happy you are to get a compliment from Kaya. Another wonderful tsundere moment for the memory banks. I’ve said it once and I’ll say it again—tsunderes are a delightful thing in this world, no matter what your gender may be. It adds a little spice that improves any and all situations.

“Yeah, so come on, man, help me think up something wicked cool for our rookies,” I said. “You must’ve heard over a hundred songs by now; I know you’ve got a good sense for what’s cool.”

“Listenin’ and creatin’ stuff are totally different... Like, I could recite the whole of *The Adventures of Siegfried*, but I couldn’t *sing* it...”

“Don’t worry, we’re not writing a whole song. I was thinking we could scribble up three fundamentals or so. Rule one of the Fellowship of the Blade... Um... ‘Stay alert! Trust your Fellows! Keep your weapon handy!’ How about that?”

The original quote was a bit more paranoid, and it felt kind of like stealing to just use the phrase as-written anyway. No one would know I was cribbing off my old world, but *I* would know, and that made me uneasy.

“And that means...what now?”

Unfortunately it made little sense to my comrade. I couldn’t blame him—the original quote came from a literal world away. And so we spent the next little while putting our heads together to try and come up with some rules that were easy to remember, meaningful, and sounded cool.

[Tips] Clans are usually ad hoc groups of people working together for mutual benefit, so they often don’t have any set of codified rules. When clans gather

round a powerful leader, the result is usually that their word is law.

To the members of the Fellowship of the Blade, Erich was someone very much worthy of their respect and someone from whom they enjoyed receiving leadership and tutelage. He would never get angry without good reason, and he would never strike them unless pain now would help them avoid death down the road. He only raised his voice during training too, and none of them had ever seen him truly angry before.

However, today was completely different. He had summoned them all to a large room in the Snowy Silverwolf; his anger seemed to visibly *ooze* from his body. Trial members and relative veterans alike entered a brutal flop sweat as they watched him puffing at his beloved pipe.

Was this truly the same man who always knew when to call for a water break after an intense round of training, or who patted them on the back with a compliment on how much they'd improved? It was hard for anyone in the room to square these two sides of him.

"Now then, everyone. We have a big gig coming up...but before that, I have something I wish to discuss with you," said Erich.

He let out a puff of smoke and gave a snap of his fingers. On command, Siegfried and Kaya unfurled a big sheet beside him. Upon the hemp cloth were three lines that almost no one in the room could read. It was obvious to everyone there that they were of utmost importance.

"Since time immemorial, people have used the clout of their employer to threaten others and get ahead in the world."

The air was filled with smoke. It should have had a fragrant, bittersweet smell to it, but it only conjured scenes of blood and anger in the minds of everyone present.

"It's a cheap scare tactic. I'm sure many of you have met similar crooks—the sort of guy who goes, 'Do you know who I work for?' the second things get hairy."

As their boss said, they were cheap, dirty words to use, but incredibly easy to

find yourself saying. The threat of a scary backer coming in to get revenge for their underlings meant that such words could be used without much fear of consequence. It didn't matter if justice was served. It was merely an effective deterrent.

"But did any of the heroes you look up to use words like these?"

No one had the guts to actually answer Erich's rhetorical question. There were heroes of all sorts, but no one could think of one who did anything that uncool. After all, if you couldn't make a threat without the need to use someone else's might, then what did you really amount to?

Yes, the heroes they looked up to, who claimed their feats with their own hands, and those who used the name of their master to get a free lunch were leagues apart. It wasn't completely shameful to state the name of your master; no one could fault you if you faced the task ahead wearing your pride in the teachings you'd received on your sleeve. If you just used your superiors as a bludgeon, however, then you were no different from any other brute with a club.

"I have decided to announce our clan's ground rules. Through them I wish for you all to understand the importance of what it means to function as an individual within a greater whole."

Erich slowly stood up, and with an almost imperceptibly quick motion, singled out the first line with his sheathed sword.

"Don't look so scared! They're three simple tenets. First! *Ever enjoyable, ever heroic!*"

Even though few could read the sentence Erich was pointing at, its importance wasn't lost on anyone.

"This one is a warning. If adventures ever seem dull, if they lose their romance, or if any of you give up on acting heroic like the legends we look up to —then I want you to lay down your sword and quit being an adventurer."

Schutzwolfe struck the second line.

"Second! *Show your might through your own merit!* This one's super simple. I don't want *anyone* using the name of the Fellowship to threaten people or

borrow money! None of the heroes we look up to did such a thing!”

A few in the room started shaking, realizing that this tenet was directed at them. However, everyone was so focused on their leader’s words that the culprits remained undetected. Erich had intensified his aura to prevent people from pointing fingers. He didn’t care about punishment. He wanted to make sure no one made this mistake ever again.

“Third! *Cast no shame upon your blade!* Do not cut down someone you’ll later regret; do not draw your blade and let it gnaw at your mind in the days following. Be ever aware of its weight on your waist and always be conscious of *why* you use it. That is the philosophy of the blade! If you cannot remember this, then you’re no better than a well-trained bandit!”

This final tenet was the keystone of any career as a butcher of men. A sword was merely a tool. Although it was an extension of one’s body, one had to be ever vigilant about the damage it could cause, else one risked all sorts of irreversible regrets. Merely drawing a blade could enrage a foe into action and unintended consequences. If you took on the responsibility of wearing a sword, then you needed to realize the destruction it inherently brought with it.

“That’s all. Three simple rules. As of today, if I find anyone breaking these rules, then I will expel them from the clan. You will never be allowed to tell a soul that you are, were, or ever have been part of the Fellowship of the Blade. That’s a kinder punishment than asking you to slit your stomachs open, no?”

No one in the room knew about the vicious form of suicide known as “seppuku” in Erich’s old world, but they could visualize just how gruesome it would be.

“I won’t criticize any of you if you decide that my clan isn’t a good fit for you.”

Those who decided to stay despite this warning knew that breaking these rules would result in a shame that was as painful as a real death.

“Everyone who understands what being in the Fellowship means, I ask you to repeat the tenets after me. Should you choose to remain silent, I accept that as your implicit decision to leave our clan behind.”

It was easy to become an adventurer, but difficult to achieve great feats as

one. Erich believed that those who didn't understand this or couldn't shoulder the responsibilities of his views of adventuring were better suited looking for different company.

"First! Ever enjoyable, ever heroic!" Erich said.

"First! Ever enjoyable, ever heroic!" came the reply.

"Second! Show your might through your own merit!"

"Second! Show your might through your own merit!"

"Third! Cast no shame upon your blade!"

"Third! Cast no shame upon your blade!"

This was yet another layer of the clan's screening process; not the kind practiced in its brutal training gauntlet, but a trial of the soul and one's own sentiment, one that conformed each applicant's mindset to the clan's values. Those who were ready to be part of the clan repeated the words without hesitation. Around half of the new recruits, some overwhelmed but well spirited, joined in the cry too.

Although most adventurers went into the business with some knowledge of the unconventional path they were taking, it was quite the scary act to reaffirm it like this. Just how unhinged were they to tread the path taken by adventurers in the Age of Gods, of figures reserved for children's bedtime stories?

"Very good! We are the Fellowship of the Blade, and as of today these are our tenets. Follow them if you wish to remain among us. Trust that I mean to follow them as closely as any of you!"

No one in the room was merely going along with the flow. Each of those who had decided to follow Erich knew that they would continue to chase their fleeting dreams of glory well into their waking hours. They had found meaning for their slowly dissipating lives in the form of adventure and this was the moment that they would put their dreams to work.

"Very good! Now that we've got that out of the way, let's talk about that *big job*. This one's got the government's seal of approval, so ready your hearts. We're going on a *stash raid!* No doubt you've heard about the creeps who've

been lining their pockets peddling brain poison to all of Marsheim lately. Today we're razing one of their warehouses!"

Erich announced their clan's biggest job thus far without giving the excitement in the room a moment to settle. This would be their first step toward ridding Marsheim of the dreaded Kykeon.

Erich's preparations had gone smoothly, and with some convincing from the Baldur Clan, the administration in Marsheim gave its approval to go through with it. In return for services rendered, the clan would collect five drachmae, with extra rewards for crooks brought in alive and actionable intelligence on Kykeon itself and its distribution.

Failure would not be tolerated. The groundwork had been laid; all that remained now was to bring the team up to speed on the operation's parameters and execute.

First, Margit and the other Fellows better suited to espionage than frontline fighting would maintain a surveillance perimeter in plainclothes, giving the signal when it was safe to begin the assault. Any hostiles would be pacified, and once the coast was clear, the others stationed in nearby houses would enter via the front and back entrances.

Once the first floor had been neutralized, they would work their way up, quickly suppressing each floor. It would be a swift operation, allowing their enemies no time to flee or even hide any incriminating evidence. It was a simple job in concept, but keeping everyone up to speed about the fine details and how they added up into the desired outcome was tricky.

"Those left unscathed by our work today will have cause regardless to take heed: we will not tolerate their efforts to hollow out the spirit of our home and break our wills! Today we earn our keep as citizens!"

"YEAH!"

Always, Erich laid plans within plans. He'd told the clan about the raid the day before not only to make sure everyone was suitably prepared, but also to find the leak in his operation; any earlier, and the mole would have had time to slip past him.

Of course, he had already tasked Schnee with keeping an eye out, but with this extra layer of preparation, he could do more than catch the mole in the act—he could *rake them over the coals*.

"All right, let's show them our stuff! Do me proud!"

"YEAAAH!"

Despite his cool exterior, Erich had a heavy feeling in the pit of his stomach. It wasn't *wrong,* but his scheme had a dash of dishonesty to it. After all, things couldn't always go as smoothly as they did in the stories...

[Tips] "Ever enjoyable, ever heroic" is the first tenet of the Fellowship of the Blade. It is meant to instill among the clan's ranks the belief that adventurers must always be as heroic as their forebears.

Siegfried was surprised that he had so little to do for once. It was the day after the bloody raid, and Erich, along with the other rookies, had begged him to take some time off. The request hadn't come due to some kind of foolish injury from the hero-hopeful's place on the front lines, charging half-cocked into the fray. He stood intact and unbruised in sunlight pregnant with the latent colors of early autumn.

Siegfried had swapped out his usual spear for the sword to better suit the battle's close quarters, but it hadn't worsened his performance one jot. He had cut down three and apprehended four—a respectable result.

If you asked Siegfried, he was uncertain it was worth calling the raid a battle. They were so prepared that they didn't once find themselves at a disadvantage. Kaya's flash-bang and tear gas potions had been thrown inside, and so the clan were able to safely enter the building—usually the most exposed moment—without issue.

Not only that, most of the people stationed inside weren't fighters. This was only natural, considering the work they were hired to do. Of course, Siegfried refused to turn himself into a cold-blooded killer—he held back and inflicted only enough damage to immobilize. Still, it was impossible to know how a battle would go, and so he had no choice but to cut down three crooks during the raid.

The foes they'd faced were an odd bunch. Getting high off their own supply, there were many who had driven their own bodies into utter ruin. Their senses dulled by the drug, they no longer felt pain, rising again and again despite their grievous wounds. The three Siegfried had been forced to kill were zombified soldiers. Nothing but swift, merciful oblivion could save them or stop them.

Although the battle itself went without much issue, Siegfried had wound up on the receiving end of a chemical attack. One of the dealers had slung some powder—Siegfried presumed it'd been pretreated Kykeon—all over him. He wasn't sure whether they had done it purposefully or if they were just grabbing at anything nearby, but it was entirely possible that they had meant to weaponize it by letting the crystals get into his eyes or nose—a more hazardous metabolic pathway than typical oral application. It would have ruined him, had it played out in the junk peddlers' favor.

Luckily, Siegfried had returned from the fray without suffering any side effects. Everyone in the operation had applied salves to protect themselves from the tear gas. This precautionary measure had probably helped shield Siegfried from any damage. It'd been the very same powerful concoction that saved him from the assault on his airways in Zeufar. The same principle, it seemed, had applied here.

Despite his clean bill of health, all the same the rest of the clan were terribly worried. It was no surprise—all of them had seen how Kykeon had ruined the lives of people around Marsheim. Siegfried had kept brushing them off—he was *perfectly all right,* for heaven's sake—but his coworkers had been unanimous: he had no choice but to kick back. So here he was, totally free and woefully bored.

"Tch, I feel fine," Siegfried muttered to himself. He wasn't acting tough—he honestly felt right as rain. He had no idea what he was supposed to do with himself.

Kaya had given him a bucketful of water—impossible to finish in a single sitting—and Goldilocks, remembering that sweating in a sauna was a good way to purge toxins from the body, had dragged him to the baths. He didn't mind doing as they asked, but he just felt awkward being treated like a patient on death's doorstep. The boredom of staying at home had eventually gotten to

him, and so he had told Kaya he was going to the baths and slipped out.

“I don’t feel like ice is in my veins, and I slept a ton last night. Why won’t they accept that I’m fine?”

Kykeon affected the brain and made you feel more energetic than you were; in truth, it dulled any receptors that sensed exhaustion in the body. It filled you with an ecstasy that felt like a gentle full-body chill, and it reduced your need to sleep or eliminate waste. Siegfried felt none of these symptoms, and he was sick of lying in bed counting the knots in the planks on the ceiling.

Siegfried didn’t have any particular destination in mind. When he left the house earlier, Kaya had scowled at him, and although she’d let him go, she busied herself with her mortar and pestle—striking with such force that Siegfried had wondered if she was imagining her worst enemy instead of herbs—in order to concoct a decent antidote.

It was as he wandered the streets of Marsheim that Siegfried realized he didn’t really have any hobbies. He often spent time at the Snowy Silverwolf now, but he couldn’t go today; Erich had ordered that he stay put for three days. He spent the rest of his time on gigs or training, but those were off the table for today. His options were also limited by the fact that Kaya had seized his purse strings—it wasn’t easy for him to stroll about with a nice drink in hand anymore.

Compared to Goldilocks, who often struck off on constitutionals around Marsheim to “widen his world,” Siegfried was rather pedestrian in where he chose to spend his time. He so often stayed at the Snowy Silverwolf in part due to a sense of obligation to the connections he had made there, but also because it was a bit frightening to stroll into a random tavern for the first time.

“What to do... What to do...”

In his wallet he had one libra and a few bronze coins. Kaya had given him a bit of extra change to visit the baths on top of his three-day allowance, but Siegfried was still at a loss as to what to do. He didn’t want to spend half the day at the bath—he wasn’t some bored old coot languishing in his retirement. He enjoyed going to the bathhouse with his friends—not just sitting there in silence as he sweated.

One pastime of his was finding one of the bards in town and seeing what song they had prepared. Unfortunately, when he heard himself being sung about in his role in felling Jonas Baltlinden, he had run away from the plaza in sheer embarrassment. The fear that they might be singing about him again somewhere put him off the idea of coming back anytime soon.

Siegfried wasn't used to people looking up to him or even receiving scant praise. He was the youngest of three brothers, from a dirt-poor farming family. His father never showed him any kindness and his mother had never even so much as hugged him. The only positive family memories from his childhood he had were of his stick-thin grandfather gently stroking his hair. To go from that to being lauded in song was just too much for the lad.

"Oh crap... Do I really have nowhere to go?"

The baths wouldn't be fun; the bard might sing about him; all taverns were off-limits. Siegfried was shocked that without a sword and a job to do, he didn't have anything else.

Back in Illfurth, every day was packed with work, with not so much as a spare moment to himself. When he did have a moment's spare time, he used to head straight to the Watch to ready himself for a life of adventuring. The rare few pockets of time left over were spent pooling together any loose change he could get for the day he left his canton. The long and short of it was that Siegfried barely had a personality of any kind outside of his working life.

All the same, he wasn't terribly exceptional in this regard. There were few pastimes available to the masses in the era he lived in. Although he wasn't to know, it was Erich's previous world that was the strange one, with games and activities vying for the masses' limited attention.

Here Siegfried was—books cost a small fortune, there were no shows on, and he couldn't even go for a jog as he was told to take it easy.

The hero-hopeful was stumped as he realized he had nothing to do. He had been so focused on chasing his dreams that he'd never thought this would ever be a possibility!

"Ugh, I'm *bored*! What do I do? I'm getting antsy..."

The young man continued to wander Marsheim like a bear that had forgotten to hibernate. With time on their hands, most people would find less salubrious ways to spend their time or simply let sloth take over and laze around, but fortunately the young adventurer had a stout heart.

“Oh, the folk market...”

Lost in thought, Siegfried had been wandering aimlessly. Now he’d found himself on a small street lined with stalls. Marsheim was home to more than its single large-scale, year-round market. It also had areas where you could pay to set up a stall for the day—similar to the open-air market in the capital. There you could find all manner of miscellany, from peddlers of homemade trinkets, junk dealers, and aspiring merchants.

“Huh... Margit said one of her favorite ways of killin’ time was to wander the folk market... Said somethin’ about finding good deals...”

Siegfried was from the countryside. He wasn’t used to seeing so many stores in one place. It had been a while since he’d first arrived in Marsheim, but he’d spent his early days there hounded by his daily expenses, and since meeting Goldilocks he had focused his efforts on surpassing his fellow adventurer. The days had flown by. He’d never really made the time to truly see what the city had to offer.

“All right, a little window shopping never hurt anyone...”

This was the perfect opportunity for the hero-hopeful to actually get acquainted with his home. Suddenly excited by the prospect of occupying himself with something so novel, he became engrossed in every little thing he passed by.

“This really pure silver?” he asked a stuart merchant.

“Yoo bet it is, my friend! From the peninsoola!”

The stuart sat before a rush mat and gestured at his wares, his accent clearly some flavor of foreign. Siegfried could tell that all the silverware was far cheaper than it should have been—most likely some sort of tin alloy. The lad had never set eyes upon silver cutlery before and had no way of knowing what the stock before him was made of, but he’d been kicking around for long

enough to feel out that something was *off*.

The piece that had caught his eye was a simply engraved metal locket—perfect for a miniature portrait or a lock of hair; he'd thought that it would suit his dear friend, but he reasoned that he didn't want to get chewed out for overspending again. He moved on. Even if it was a cheap gewgaw on markdown, fifteen librae was still far out of Siegfried's remit. It wasn't worth haggling or writing IOUs for. He shook his head and moved on.

"They ain't even got decent gear here..." he grumbled as he passed another stall.

"If you're gonna complain, bucko, then shoo! Go away!" the merchant barked.

Some equipment looked decent from afar, but up close they were all dull, shoddy things. They had evidently been sold on from some locals who had acquired them after some adventurers had saved them from bandits. Ever since Erich had picked out his sword, anything subpar failed to impress.

"Yeah, but, c'mon, mister," Siegfried retorted. "Look at the blade! It's totally chipped. It'd hurt, yeah, but I'd fare better cuttin' logs than flesh with this."

Siegfried's comments weren't simply hot air. His friend's Schutzwolfe was a well-crafted piece by a talented blacksmith—despite it having been forged in an era where there wasn't much call for bespoke work—and the store that had sold him his spear was filled with glittering new weapons, so much so that he wondered if something so beautiful should be used for wounding others. Over these past few months in Marsheim, the hero-hopeful had developed quite the eye for decent equipment.

"Ya sharpen it yourself, kid! Hey, I'll throw you a bone. How's thirty librae sound?"

"*Thirty*?! For this piece of trash? Come on, at least try and be convincing!"

"Gah, pipe down, will ya?! Better it's used than melted down, no? By the looks of ya, you're a rookie, right? This should be more than good enough for you."

As Siegfried grumbled that this was an awful sales tactic, he received a gobful

of spit in return; he decided to move along, out of the horrid salesman's range.

As expected for a folk market, nothing quite lived up to the standards of the fare you'd turn up at the main market, but Siegfried found himself enjoying the simple act of seeing what was on offer. Wondering what drove a merchant to sell *that* bit of kit or considering what circumstances led to them deciding to part with *this* little oddity was a fun thought experiment. When he had rushed about the city in his early days to make a mental map of the place, he hadn't made the small discoveries of what the city had to offer; he almost regretted neglecting it for so long.

"Ooh... Now that's a pretty piece," he murmured.

"Oho, you have a good eye, good sir!"

A stall run by a mensch woman who looked to have only just come of age had caught Siegfried's eye. It was lined with all sorts of handmade trinkets.

Although most average citizens didn't have all too much spending power, they had just about enough to give a little unique touch to their appearances. It was therefore a natural result that craftspeople with a delicate hand would make jewelry using pretty stones found on the river shore, glass pieces from abroad, or even seashells. These had a folksy charm to them and were popular for their simplicity.

"It's made using a lake mermaid's tear!" she went on.

"Huh? Mermaids live in lakes?"

The piece that had caught Siegfried's eye was a necklace decorated with an emerald-stained glass rondure. It caught the light beautifully, making for a modest and fashionable piece.

"Some of them, yes. It's just a figure of speech, though—this is just a little glass ball, hardly a gemstone plucked straight out of legend!"

"Well, yeah. In the stories it was a pearl, right?"

"Sure was! We figured we'd move more of 'em if they had a catchy name. Anyway, it might be glass, but it sure is pretty."

Siegfried nodded in agreement. This piece had evidently broken off from

some sort of glasswork in transit. “Mermaid’s tear” was far more appealing than “reworked piece of debris.” Most importantly, it was in a wonderful shade of verdant green—Kaya’s favorite color.

“How much?”

“You gifting it to a special someone? Then I’ll part with it for fifty assarii!” The merchant added with a cheeky smile, “If this were a *real* pearl, it would set you back fifty drachmae!”

Siegfried didn’t mind the jovial banter and gladly paid a sum that would have amounted to half a day’s work back in his soot-black days. He didn’t care what the “original” price was. He was enjoying this new hobby of strolling about Marsheim, and it wouldn’t set him back so much as to annoy Kaya.

After the whole incident with Acronym, Kaya had fashioned the pricey fabric into some clothes. Despite her initial anger, it had become one of her favorite outfits; she maintained it fastidiously. As long as he didn’t go overboard, buying little trinkets for his precious partner promised to make his newfound preoccupation that much more of a treat.

“Hmm... Who was it that mentioned that sometimes you get merchants sellin’ off furniture and gems without knowing what they’re really worth?”

Siegfried had picked up many a juicy rumor in his time, but it was only since he started partnering with Goldilocks that he realized these nuggets could be put to work. His friend had a whole wealth of strange factoids.

Siegfried understood well enough that your average merchant lived by the law of “buy cheap, sell dear.” Like adventurers, they would make safe sales in safe conditions, but put their lives on the line when it truly mattered. Siegfried could recall the cool expression of his friend as he unpacked all this. If Goldilocks were here now, he probably wouldn’t hesitate to tell Siegfried exactly what metal alloy that “silverware” had been made of.

Siegfried continued his stroll, but a warrior was still a warrior even on his days off—his body reacted as someone stood in his shadow.

“Hmph!”

Siegfried slipped a short dagger from his sleeve as he drew his head safely

away. He made a half spin on his left foot and grabbed his would-be assailant.

His attacker was a mensch woman; she looked around thirty years old. Her clothes made her seem like just another neighborhood local, but he knew that she hadn't just stumbled into the ideal position for an assassin. He'd been enjoying his little constitutional, but Siegfried wasn't fool enough to let his guard down. He had spotted the same face over and over throughout the day—even the most witless mark would grow suspicious.

The hero-hopeful was almost exasperated with what a boneheaded play this was. Not only had she stopped and moved as he did, she had come right up behind him. If she were a regular civilian, he would be able to just apologize and move on with his day, but obviously that wasn't the case with this woman.

"Scream and I'll slice your throat," he hissed. "You're the one who was tailin' me—can't fault me for self-defense now, can ya?"

Siegfried's left hand clasped her lapels; his right held his dagger to her throat. The fact that she wasn't screaming bloody murder was more evidence that she was dangerous.

"I-I'm here with a little proposal. SSurely the drug must have worn off by now?" she said.

"Y'what? The drug?"

"The one you were covered with yesterday..."

Can't I catch a damn break from this whole drug business?

Siegfried could feel his dormant frustrations stirring to life, but he mulled over her words with a cool head. Internally, he lamented that ever since he'd become an adventurer everyone around him seemed to talk in riddles. Positioning himself behind her now, he pulled her into a nearby alley.

"Sorry, but I ain't had any side effects since your lot chucked that powder on me," he said.

"Huh?! N-No, that's impossible... A-At any rate, you and Goldilocks...you're on bad terms, yes?!"

"I *said* keep your voice down—unless you want a hole in your throat."

“Ngh...”

This had all but clarified that this woman was with the group seeking to despoil Marsheim.

What Siegfried needed to be vigilant about was whether she was acting alone or as part of a group. If the one who had approached him to make a deal were kidnapped, then they would probably start to panic soon enough. He drew the blade a measure tighter to her throat—close enough that a bead of blood formed on her skin.

“Sorry, but next time, if you so much as sneeze, you’ll be bleeding out on the street. You better watch yourself.”

“O-Our information network is broad and wide! We’ve dug up the dirt on your relationships!”

Letting the woman talk, Siegfried counted in his head as he half listened. How long would it take for someone to come and find her? Surely they would have had someone within sniping range in case the situation got hairy, at least?

“We’ve waited a while now, and no one’s come to save you,” Siegfried said. “So, which is it? Were you abandoned, or are you just a decoy?”

“H-Hold on a second! The drug must have worked! Why else would you suddenly take time off...?”

“I think you’ve got the wrong end of the stick.”

No reinforcements were coming; no one was here to interfere. Either they didn’t care about her, or she had foolishly come alone thinking that he would be enfeebled from their last encounter. Siegfried didn’t feel good about it, but decided to put more pressure into his hold—not to push the blade in, but to knock her out cold.

“You think Erich and I *hate each other?* We just piss about because we know we’ve got each other’s back. If we were actually at each other’s throats, then why the hell would I be doing this to you?”

With her carotid artery practically clamped shut, the woman passed out. Siegfried made sure not to let up until he was absolutely sure that her limp

body wouldn’t be moving again anytime soon.

This whole process could have been sped up if Kaya were here. One of her potions could black you out for four hours straight with a whiff. Obviously, he had the situation handled on his own, but the hero-hopeful felt a pang of unease from being without a partner at his side and a friend to banter with. Seeing this woman limp in his arms, he couldn’t help but see himself in her failure to stick the landing on a solo mission.

Siegfried stood at the ready for a little while longer to make absolutely sure that no backup was coming, but there was no thug trying to take her back, nor an assassin aiming to silence him. It seemed she had approached him alone.

“They don’t rate me highly, do they...” the young adventurer grumbled to himself.

Adventuring invited unwanted visitors to one’s doorstep at all hours of the day, meaning you had to be ready to move to action even when you were “off duty.” Ever since that day in the Golden Deer, just before his big blowout from the gig where Jonas Baltlinden had shown up, when Goldilocks had warned him that he could be killed for a handful of coins, Siegfried had decided to stay permanently vigilant. He carried a small dagger up his sleeve and always carried hemp bags and rope—and if they came in handy with the shopping now and again, so much the better.

The young adventurer tied the rope once around her ribs and once around her arms. This way she wouldn’t be able to escape even if she removed her joints from their sockets. He rifled through her pockets and found a blade, a wallet, and a few glittering scraps.

“She did say the effects were just about wearin’ off... Did she wanna turn me against the others by gettin’ me hooked on this stuff?”

Although he’d never felt the effects firsthand, Siegfried was very aware that the drug flung at him yesterday was extremely addictive and caused painful withdrawal symptoms. Someone must have watched the scene and reported to the enemy side that Siegfried was a few steps shy of self-annihilation. She must have brought these scraps in hopes of luring him over to their side in a fit of overconfidence. Unfortunately it meant nothing to someone who was in perfect

health.

“Now, what to do with her... I’d cause a scene if I just carried her back...”

Siegfried had by chance—or perhaps due to his good luck—managed to bump into and wrangle a perfect stool pigeon. He folded his arms as he pondered his next move. It was still the middle of the day; he wanted to avoid the guards cornering him and asking—justifiably—why he was carrying a bound woman.

“Oh yeah! I did a job at a place near here before. Maybe I can borrow a cart or something from them...”

Another stroke of good luck meant that the alley Siegfried was in wasn’t too far from a store he had helped out before. With a cart and a mat, no one would suspect he was pushing around a person. There weren’t any noble-run events going on, and so the guards were on low alert. No one was likely to ask to see what was under the mat.

Siegfried patted himself on the back with thoughts that today was going swimmingly—the store owner had been so impressed with Siegfried’s earlier work and never asked why he needed the cart—as he pushed the loaded cart out from the alley.

“Oh crap... They’re totally gonna ask why I was out...”

As the Snowy Silverwolf came into view a new problem arose. He could already see himself getting chewed out by his clan for ignoring their advice to stay put. It wasn’t the most appealing of situations, but Siegfried had chosen his lot; he steeled himself for the extended apology to come.

[Tips] More than any of the more specific and more obvious adverse side effects, perhaps the largest threat posed by a drug habit is the *habit itself*. Those who go toe-to-toe with their chemical dependencies swiftly learn that “willpower” is largely an illusion; even the firmest moral code can collapse when you need your next hit as badly as you need food, water, or sleep.

Siegfried’s surprise present was the perfect way for me to turn up the heat under our little internal issue just that little bit more. The man of the hour had

knelt on the floor to apologize for not detoxing at the baths or resting at home, but I forgave him and told him that it was time to do something that I'd been sort of sitting on.

The Snowy Silverwolf...was not where we were today. We were in a room of an abandoned house, away from anywhere we would cause any trouble. It was owned by the Baldur Clan, and I had received their permission to make use of it a while ago in the event that I might need to do a little dirty work. To think the day had finally come! It was a little small for our group, but we would be fine.

"Now then, people," I said. "What do you think is worse than dying in battle?"

"Huh? Worse than *dying*?" Etan replied. Clearly the lad was too honest to have picked up on my intentions with our day were. He wasn't *wrong* to be such a boy scout. Having your character sheet taken away amounted to having the curtains drawn on your adventure. The world may as well not exist if you no longer have any way of participating in it.

However, if death truly was the worst thing, then we wouldn't have the phrase "living hell."

"The one thing worse than dying...is not being *allowed* to die," I said.

In the center of the room was the woman that had tried to strike a little bargain with Siegfried. She was going to illustrate my case; more's the pity for her.

"From certain angles, death is a release. When we die and receive our judgment from the gods, we are freed from all the pain of the world of the living."

Our sensory systems allowed us to interact with the world. Without them, pain hardly entered the picture. Which meant that if you couldn't die, then there would be *nothing* to stop the pain.

"You must have heard similar stories in myths. There are tons about someone who was cursed to never die and punished with endless ordeals; about someone who was strung up and forced to suffer through eternal hunger."

The worst of these were stories where one's physical body decayed, but the soul was still locked in suffering. We had seen a perfect example of this last

winter—the herbalist-turned-geist in the ichor maze. There were those whose suffering continued despite their deaths dating back to the Age of Gods.

Powerful wraiths like Lady Leizniz could purge themselves of their suffering by getting revenge after their deaths—though to tell you the truth, it was weird to me to call it a death when she still was very much present in this world—and could live out their afterlife in joy, but if you asked me, I would have preferred cutting ties with this mortal coil without lingering regrets.

I often claimed that death was the end of everything—that went for both us and our enemies.

"Of course, we don't have the gods' powers, but there are ways of punishing people without permitting them the sweet release of death."

The military code of the Imperial Japanese Army included a line that stated that soldiers should not suffer the disgrace of becoming a live prisoner. Despite being a world away, this same way of thinking was present in townsfolk and soldiers here too.

Hostages from the knightly and noble classes were treated well—you made more money ransoming an *intact* one, after all—but this was a different story for regular folk. If you were taken captive by bandits, you would be lucky if they *just* killed you. At worst, you'd be sold off under the table for pocket change. Some people thought it was better to just end your own life before you were captured, because if your captors took a liking to you, you could find yourself being tortured or abused with no end in sight.

"It's a world that I cannot understand. But I want you all to know that there are freaks out there who find pleasure in watching others suffer. Extracting information comes second to these assholes—the torture is the main appeal. Don't forget, okay?"

If someone like this caught you and you knew there was no one coming to save you, then the only thing that lay ahead was utter despair. The more I thought about this awful possibility, the more I realized the importance of a clan—a group of allies who would seek you out, should you go missing.

It went without saying that if one of our Fellows had vanished one day, we would have put all our resources into finding them.

As my Fellows gulped, I returned to the matter at hand.

“Today, unfortunately, we risk becoming some of those freaks. Siegfried? What comes to mind when I say ‘torture’?”

My comrade put on a sour expression and cogitated audibly for a little while.

“Nails, I guess? Like someone pullin’ them out,” he said. “That form of punishment comes up in some of the stories I’ve heard, I think.”

“A good, traditional answer. Incredibly painful, difficult to endure, and not fatal. Most people have them too. Imagine this for me—someone thrusting a needle in between your finger and nail.”

Everyone took a step away from Siegfried.

“H-Hey, c’mon! Don’t look at me like that! I didn’t come up with it!”

“That’s not all, Sieg, what you said—”

“Stop it! I was just talking about nail *removal*! This crap about needles is making my fingers twitch! The hell kinda life do you have to live to think of that?!”

This image had been in my brain since who knew when. It was a good question—what kind of mental state would lead you to cook up something like that?

“*No one* can put up with that kind of pain, so my advice for you is to give as much nonessential information as you can and avoid getting in that position in the first place. Our fingers are an adventurer’s lifeblood, after all.”

There were many cutthroat clans that would blacklist a member for giving up even a scrap of information, but I wasn’t like them. If you returned alive from a humiliating defeat, then it was better for your own mental state to make amends by your own hand.

“Anyway,” I continued, “we won’t be pulling any nails today. It’s messy, for one.”

“You’re worried about the *cleaning*...?” Siegfried muttered.

“Oh, and also, if you do anything too gruesome you might frighten your

captive into surrender or wanting to die. You might think that you're not causing physical damage and push them into wanting to bite their tongue or something—so I'd advise you use a method that's pretty idiotproof."

I picked up what I had prepared.

It was a delicious plate of sushi. No, of course not—we weren't using starvation tactics here. Such methods might have been interesting in their own twisted way, but I didn't want to wait days until our captive got ravenous. What I had was a simple wooden bucket. Inside it was fresh well water. Next to it were five others just like it.

"This is why I prepared this couch."

I woke her up with a faceful of chilly water. She woke with a spluttering start.

"Good morning! Or should I say good day? Now then, mind telling me your name?"

The woman was clearly shocked at waking up in an unknown room with her head covered in a sack and drenched in cold water.

"Wh-Who are you?! What is this?! Do you know who I am?!" she shrieked.

"Now, now. All I want from you are the answers to my questions."

I ignored her spirited and foulmouthed insults and got the next bucket ready. I slowly poured the water over her covered face and let the water soak into the cloth of the sack. As it drank in the water, it got heavier and lay close upon her face. She was lying down with her face up, and so the water gradually pushed out any available air as the sack clung to her mouth and nose. Her body reacted instinctively by trying to breathe in, but it only resulted in her sucking the wet sack to her mouth, the sudden intake of water causing her to splutter. The result was that I could create at will a sensation akin to drowning.

The bucket wasn't large, so there wasn't any danger of her *actually* drowning, but it pushed her to her limit. It was a crude and rudimentary form of torture—only needing a cloth (or sack in our case), restraints, and some water. There were older forms of this that existed on Earth that required gallons of running water, or a way of hanging your captive upside down with their head submerged, or even ones that didn't restrain them properly, but this was a far

more efficient format.

A certain intelligence agency whose base was in Langley favored this method —*waterboarding,* as it was known in my old world—but apparently they found it so efficient that even the ones applying the torture were frightened by it. I was honestly surprised that it was never banned in their court of law.

Unlike the older forms where you dunked your detainee in water, this method resulted in less water entering the lungs, making it less likely to accidentally kill the person you were torturing. Even if they went into respiratory arrest, you could use the same methods as resuscitating someone who had fallen into a river.

“Ugh... That’s sick...”

“W-Won’t she drown?”

My clan members murmured among themselves as I calmly repeated the procedure, making sure she was breathing again as I did so.

This wasn’t some kind of sick fetish of mine. Painful torture could lead the person you were torturing to admit to things they hadn’t even done just to escape, and so it made more sense to put her under prolonged questioning. That was in usual cases. We didn’t have somewhere we could leave someone chained up for a long time, nor did we have someone skilled in the art of information extraction. It was the fact of the matter that this nonlethal form of torture was the most efficient course of action to us at the moment.

It would have made my life *so much* easier if I had some grasp of psychosorcery, but that stuff was *hard*. Although it wasn’t forbidden at the College, novices weren’t permitted to use it, since it could cause negative effects to their own psyche. I was still a relative beginner with magic—I was almost guaranteed to screw it up.

The woman panted as I allowed her to breathe.

“Your name?” I asked again.

“D-Don’t think...you’ll get off lightly for this!”

“Okaaay, understood! More water!”

Evidently she was spunky enough to keep yapping at me after one bucketful. All I would need to do is go at it a second or third time until her lips were feeling a little bit looser.

I gave my clan members a fixed stare as I worked. This was a form of training for them, as well as a warning from their senior in the business.

In my time working for Lady Agrippina on life-or-death missions, I wasn't just risking my life crossing blades with her would-be assassins. I had been a target for more covert forms of incapacitation—to be drugged and captured before having every last drop of information extracted from me.

It wasn't just one's enemies that you had to worry about. It was a deplorable fact of the world that some people did this for *fun.* It wasn't rare to find mutilated corpses, discarded after some bandit had finished having their fun with them.

If my clan were to face up against villains and crooks, it wouldn't be such a bad thing for them to know the lengths our enemies were willing to go to take us down.

"If you're working for a noble, someone out there might try to get information out of you just like this. If you choose to surrender, try and suss out what kind of person your enemy is. And if you do end up getting caught, I advise you to give any information that's fine to give. Like your name, for example."

If you know torture is coming, then you can prepare for it mentally, at least to a certain extent, and also try and come up with some countermeasures. We living beings, weak to pain as we were, had every reason to act prudently while we still had our wits about us.

Being cooperative, while sidestepping anything truly important, also worked reasonably well buying time. If you were good enough at that kind of stalling you could even potentially wring a little actionable intel out of your captors or ferret out an escape route, but whatever the case, it was always a good idea to buy time for any imaginable rescue. It increased your chances of emerging from the encounter in one piece.

"If that doesn't work and you have information that you would *never* part with, then...I suggest you fight like a cornered animal. Don't ever give in. Believe

in the skills you honed and see the thing to the end fighting tooth and nail."

I wanted to give my rookies as much advice and warning as I could, but it was a sad fact of life that something unexpected could befall them at any time. That was why I wanted them to choose to fight as best they could and leave the world without any lingering regrets. I would never order any of them to die.

"Don't do anything you can't personally live with. It's not easy to carry on with your heart full of regrets."

If your resolve was set, then that was all that mattered. If you ever found things were too much, then you could go adventuring or retire somewhere else. I could show my clan members the possibilities that lay before them and lead them forward, but I could not and would not drag them there.

One of the more important things to remember when going into our line of work was that a hero was, to some people, a nuisance—someone who would be better off out of the picture.

After her sixth brush with asphyxiation, she finally coughed up some information. Unfortunately it wasn't anything all too helpful, just the fact that she was part of a new organization formed to disseminate Kykeon.

The woman had tried to bluff her way out of the situation at first, claiming that it was in fact the Baldur Clan who were working behind the scenes, and that I would be subject to Nanna's fury.

Whoever it was we were fighting against was playing it safe. They had cloaked what needed hiding and made sure that no individual would have enough information to give any indication as to who was working at the heart of the operation.

Even going through Marsheim and beating up every suspect one by one would still take more time than Kykeon needed to permeate through Ende Erde. Their warehouses, too, were widely distributed and almost entirely decentralized. I had asked my alfar companions for some help, but they were only able to point me to the warehouse we had raided.

The deeper we got into this, the more I started to think that although Marsheim was the unfortunate target of their debilitating attack, they were

probably working from a base at a considerable remove. The manufacturer might not even have been in Marsheim.

After our short but intense meeting, I let the woman go, reasoning that she had no more information to give. As I stood by the window and watched her dash off, Siegfried came up to me with a sigh.

“Hey, Erich? We got a few rookies who, although they’re not properly initiated, they...”

“...Wanna quit?”

“Yeah. I think this was a bit much for them. But...y’know, I was probably a few steps shy of endin’ up in a similar situation to her...”

My comrade had a good head on his shoulders. Sieg could see the possible alternate path where he was spoon-fed the drug, rendered a junk-sick wreck, and then tortured to give up everything he knew about us before finally being “rewarded” with another hit. I was almost jealous of this guy’s luck stat.

“Think about it this way, Sieg. That means that the ones who chose to stay have the resolve to be great adventurers. We should be happy that they’ve got good backbones.”

“Yeah... Guess you’re right.”

I didn’t let myself get too jealous, though—his luck was my luck. Our enemy had the false impression that Siegfried was more sick than he was, and this had allowed me to get a reading on the affiliation of the possible spy in our ranks. Whoever they were working for, it wasn’t our mysterious drug-dealing enemy. If they really had the inside scoop on our clan, they would have known that Siegfried *hadn’t* been affected by Kykeon. He hadn’t shown symptoms all through yesterday, and the fact that they hadn’t waited long to reach out to him meant that they hadn’t reworked it for a delayed onset.

Nanna had already confirmed that a Kykeon high only lasted about four to six hours. One of the major draws of it was that it kicked in almost immediately. This was reassuring information in the event it was used against us.

“If this is enough to get their stomachs turning, they’re not cut out to be heroes. Right?”

Siegfried had seemed pretty stone-faced through it all; I figured he could ground me, but he just sighed again.

“For me...I guess it’s made my resolve a bit more solid. Made me think that I’m gonna find who’s doing this and make sure they never come back to Ende Erde.”

“Great! Great. A half-baked resolve is going to get you killed. I’m not faulting those who left—it takes a certain type of bravery to quit before it gets dangerous. I don’t mind if people leave the Fellowship. But the people who remain need to know that we’ve started a real conflict.”

“I ain’t got a single urge to run away, but, ugh, it doesn’t feel good to know that I *can’t*.”

“I wasn’t testing you, comrade. Sorry if this whole thing’s upset you.”

Resolve was, ultimately, calcified sentimentality. If I had accidentally offended my friend, then I wanted to apologize to him. He brushed off my apology, saying that I wasn’t at fault—he just needed to work through and accept the situation in his own head.

“However,” I went on, “I think the higher-ups in their organization are going to be on high alert, Sieg. I’d advise you not to go about alone. And it might be best to either eat at places you trust or bring your own food and drink. Kykeon’s taken through the mouth, after all.”

“What a pain in the... Ugh, but, yeah, who knows how many heroes got done in by poison, so fair enough...” Siegfried grumbled.

I slapped my disgruntled companion on the back and suggested that he hurry on home.

I had seen Kaya earlier. She had been silent and *fuming*...

[Tips] Darker parts of society are home to more people who are aware that prolonged suffering is the ideal way of wearing down someone’s soul.

Autumn of the Seventeenth Year

Putting the Scenario on Hold

Sometimes a scenario cannot be contained in a day's session. GMs are known to put the story on temporary hold with a midsized battle or the like. This sort of decision often comes up in urbancrawl adventures that offer a bit more for players to chew on and mull over compared to simple hack-and-slash fare. The GM is as much a director as they are a writer, and so a good GM must keep one eye on the clock so that their players can get home to their beds safely and rise ready to face the new day.

With the arrival of fall came a little birthday celebration from those close to me. It wasn't worth dwelling on; my impatience with the whole Kykeon affair left the day feeling tainted.

While it was true that the Fellowship of the Blade was coming along nicely, we were still far from averting Marsheim's sputtering, sickly end. What small headway we'd made had told us nothing about the mastermind behind the Kykeon industry; we didn't even know where they were operating from.

It nagged at the back of my mind, a faint ember burning in a cranny of my brain, never winking out. I preferred to tick jobs off my list well ahead of their deadlines; sitting with a problem this severe festering in the corner of my vision was starting to take its toll.

We'd eliminated a few other bases since that first raid. All we had to show for it was solid proof that all the Kykeon in Marsheim was manufactured elsewhere. That was it. A manufacturing base wasn't something you could up and move with ease; if it or the chief distributors' hideout had been in town, we would have flushed it out by now.

It was a similar sensation to being finally certain that your house key was *definitely not* in your pocket or your bag after checking a hundred times.

Eliminating one possibility meant that infinite other possibilities were still waiting out there for you. My knees felt weak contemplating all the places we'd turned over just today looking for one faint lead.

Ende Erde was, to put it bluntly, a big place. The Mauser and a plethora of lesser rivers ran through it; the plains were wide and plentiful. There were countless hidey-holes that our crooks could crawl into without fear of ever being found. Even Margrave Marsheim couldn't realistically comb the whole land for our quarry.

Given how serious they were about their operation, it would figure they'd situate themselves somewhere well out of the way of prying eyes.

We couldn't count on the local guards catching the stuff at the points of entry at the city gates—Kykeon came in thin slivers, making it trivial to smuggle. Running thorough checks on everyone that came in would bring the city's trade to a standstill; at best, it would drive the dealers to more creative methods for concealing their stashes.

Getting hold of even a loose thread of intel was proving to be a logistical nightmare, never mind hunting down the culprits themselves. *GM, you didn't write this story in a frenzied all-nighter, did you?* I wasn't against big mysteries, but no one enjoys an escape room that they can't get out of, do they?

I let out a beaten and deflating groan.

"Hey, we got a job today. Try and cheer up a bit, man," said Siegfried.

"You're mostly sighs lately, Erich," said Margit.

"And you're puffing on your pipe an awful lot... You're running through your herbs faster than usual," Kaya added.

I had to snap myself out of my funk—we were on a big job with the Fellowship today.

"Yeah... Sorry, guys. Just agonizing over the usual. I guess with summer ending, I just realized how much we've stalled out..."

I needed to shift gears—it was fine to have multiple jobs running at once. I could only justify moping around so much. We weren't Marsheim's sole

protectors. There was the local administration, the Baldur Clan, Clan Laurentius, the Heilbronn Familie—a whole range of people making sure this city didn't turn into a scene from some zombie flick. We just had to keep putting one foot in front of the other. I could air my complaints over a cup of something hard once this was all wrapped up.

"Though," Siegfried said, "it's kinda weird to go about town fully equipped..."

"Quite," Margit replied. "I must say it's odd, feeling so many eyes on me in my scouting gear."

It was as they'd said. We'd hit the streets of Marsheim loaded for bear, fit to stand out to the whole world as representatives of the Fellowship. It felt weird to stand out this much, and not in a fun way. We were on our way to the Snowy Silverwolf to meet with the other Fellows, who were similarly equipped. I expected that if anyone saw us from afar they would think we were going to stir up trouble with another clan or on some serious business from the government.

"Ha ha, sorry, Dee. Looks like I'm the only one who's dressed like a normal person, as always."

"Come on, call me Siegfried... But don't worry, Kaya. It makes sense that you only need your staff."

My comrade's observation was astute—Kaya barely looked any different. The only difference was that she'd changed out her usual boots for something a bit sturdier. It would be dangerous to assume that she wasn't prepared—she was just as ready as the rest of us to bring out the fight at the drop of a hat.

Her staff wasn't quite the same as it had been when we first met. The one she now held was crafted from the undying sacred cedar branches and roots that we had found at the end of our adventure last winter. It was composed of a tangle of branches and roots, and parts of it were coated in a symbiotic lichen-like fungus. Somehow she'd managed to integrate these miraculously still-living components into her old staff. The end result was something entirely unique.

It was slightly taller than Kaya herself, and with its new crescent-shaped end, it looked like a far more powerful beast. It didn't just improve Kaya's mana output—it was a piece of equipment specially designed to fit her concoction-based skill set, vastly improving her command over her materials. It required

delicate care, but used with skill, she could pluck roots from the ground with ease, dry herbs in an instant, and even dissolve rock as easily as sugar.

With her improved equipment, Kaya had crafted a whole new selection of drafts that were literal lifesavers. Most recently she had concocted an unbelievable potion that could fix a broken bone in *two weeks*. I was flabbergasted, but she told me that she was still far from her goals.

“And you’ve got your potions, and you’re in your best gear,” Siegfried added. “You, uh... You look great...”

“R-Really? Hehe, thank you.”

Nice one, Sieg! Your voice kind of trailed off at the end there, but you complimented her!

“I feel a bit more confident now,” Kaya went on with a smile.

The outfit that Siegfried had complimented was a chartreuse silk robe decorated with embroidery. She had redyed the whopping five-drachmae fabric that Siegfried had accidentally splashed out on and fashioned it into something suitable to her tastes. It wasn’t a gaudy piece at all; it suited her well.

Naturally, she’d done some tinkering with the dye; the charming green color wasn’t the only thing it’d contributed—the fabric repelled water, dirt, and the occasional edged weapon. It didn’t play nicely with anything *metal*, but Kaya didn’t carry anything like that in the first place. Then there was her necklace. She’d gone for glass rather than a gemstone; despite its simple outward appearance, I could tell she’d made a tactical decision including it.

With her cutting such a prepared figure, I doubted that anyone could say that she was less prepared than Siegfried and I with our weapons at the ready or Margit with her camouflage cloak.

Character sheet item additions aside, our job today was to lead the rest of our clan to the Adventurer's Association. Not to raid them, of course; today, we were the Association's display pieces.

A mediator from the government had dropped through bearing word from on high; to stimulate the Empire's economic health, they'd put in a request to circulate our stock of ore and fuel around the borderlands. Of course, Marsheim's Adventurer's Association had jumped at the chance to serve.

Trade had stagnated lately thanks to a brutal ambush that'd befallen a caravan owned by a certain well-connected merchant family. Even with every assurance that their future ventures would be well guarded, they'd grown wary of any large-scale job beyond the city limits.

The convoy in question had been headed by this family, and twelve others much like it had agreed to hitch their wagons. Each had brought their own personal guards and day laborers, with fifty hired adventurers bulking up their fighting force to a massive hundred fifty warm bodies.

The expedition had attracted a few wandering priests and mages, and the leaders' preparations had been thorough—picking the safest roads, hiring the best scouts their money could buy—everyone had been certain it would turn out fine. However, in early autumn, when they'd been expected to arrive home...not a single soul had turned up.

All the smaller merchants who'd done business with the Association were stunned into inaction. Jonas Baltlinden was *gone;* the trade routes were supposed to be safe! Anyone would be nervous about hitting the roads again when such a stunningly outfitted convoy could just vanish into thin air. Caravans were large-scale operations; they attracted attention. All manner of paranoid rumors abounded: Ende Erde had been cursed by the heavens, or Baltlinden had risen from the grave, et cetera, et cetera. Folks were getting unruly about it all.

This was where the Fellowship of the Blade came in.

As of now, our current roster numbered sixteen Fellows. Despite having looted all of our gear, I had made sure that everyone was decently equipped, and my training had left them head and shoulders above your average cut-rate

mercenary.

Expecting that one of these days we might have to dirty our hands on the mass combat rules, I'd trained them all in close quarters fighting as a unit. Whether it was to fall into a testudo formation or create a spear wall, I was certain that they could change formation faster than most of our competition.

We held together well; I trusted them to perform swimmingly if we ended up running defense for someone. We'd left a strong impression on the local government; convinced that we were a reliable bunch, they'd begged the caravans to form up again on the grounds that the Fellowship would have their back. And so, we found ourselves armed to the teeth and laden with the public's trust. The merchants were scared. Nobody wanted to settle for the sort of cheap, unmotivated, disloyal muscle fifty assarii could buy; at the same time, they had their doubts as to whether even a top-dollar group could hold their own. Our job today was to put on such a good show of things that it'd convince our clients to return to business as usual.

Each of us was being paid ten librae just to stand around.

Showing off your fancy new toys was part of the point now. The prospective caravans needed to eye us up and see if the government had picked out a group of adventurers that could really pull their weight and protect them out on the road. No one wanted to drop a lot of money on a dark horse candidate.

Fortunately the lingering heat of the summer was dissipating, and it wasn't too uncomfortable to be dressed in armor. I would happily put up with a little bit of sweat if it meant protecting Ende Erde's trade routes.

These caravans were always carrying stock—they would journey out to sell their goods and then restock as they traveled back. If they stopped working then Marsheim would lose out materially *and* economically. The government could fix prices as a stopgap measure, but this would affect regular trade. Black markets would prosper, creating hyperinflationary bidding wars. It would result in an economic collapse; we had to step up to the plate so the good people of Marsheim could have food on theirs.

Yesterday I ordered the whole clan to polish their weapons and armor to a mirror sheen before dragging them all to the baths to make sure they were

clean and their beards (if applicable) were trimmed. We all had to scrub up to give the best possible impression.

I knew that looking good and marching well weren't signs of capable bodyguards, but as I had told the rookies before, looking the part instilled confidence in the client. You could only prove you had the right stuff in a real battle, so this was the best we could do beforehand. Even the most amazing confectioners would have difficulty attracting a crowd if their presentation was awful.

"We're adventurers, man... I ain't a fan of strutting around like I'm onstage."

"Come now, Sieg! I'm surprised to hear you say that; the way you used to moon over Heavy Tusk Gattie, you'd think he was some big-name actor."

"Yeah, but that was *Gattie*! Anyone woulda lost their head! His mane was so cool, and he was built like a damn *draft horse*!"

"That's exactly why we're doing this today," I said, gesturing at our appearances. "It's the reason I keep telling the clan that we should present ourselves as ideal adventurers. That means every once in a while we've got to indulge in a little showmanship."

If an adventurer was so deliriously ambitious as to aspire to the heights of heroes sung of for centuries, then they needed charisma well beyond any legend of the stage. It wouldn't do for the real thing to pale in comparison to their fictionalized counterpart.

As I struck a dramatic and heroic pose, Siegfried grunted as he tilted his head back, then looked down at the ground and ground his teeth. He almost spat out the next words.

"Yeah, yeah, you got me. I hate the fact that I agree with ya."

"Nice! Erich one, Sieg zero."

"Must you two always be such children?" Margit said.

"I don't mind," Kaya chipped in. "I *like* it when Dee gets competitive."

Our companions could only smirk at the scene in front of them. Here we were, two young men strapped head-to-toe in gleaming armor and deadly

weapons, making merry like the boys we'd barely ceased to be. It was okay—as long as Sieg got the picture, all was good.

No one else was to know this, but back in my TRPG days we called our PCs the "cast"—all the world was a stage, and I was used to being but an actor upon it. So what if I leaned in a little now? I was well within an adventurer's remit.

"Hm?"

As we neared the Snowy Silverwolf, I heard mewling from a nearby alley. It was a cat.

"Oh! It's you. The runaway cat!"

Back in our soot-black days, the cat lord had tasked us with capturing this tortoiseshell cat after he had stolen from the shops of Marsheim. What a surprise to see him again. As I glanced over, he raised a fresh ruckus plainly directed at me.

"Sorry, buddy. We're on our way to an important job."

I imagined he was making such a fuss because he either recognized me or just wanted a bite. Our gig today wouldn't take us out of the city, so I wasn't carrying anything the little fella would enjoy. It wasn't Rhinian of me to neglect a cat in need, but it also wasn't terribly Rhinian of me to fob off work about it.

Yet he wouldn't stop meowing.

"Hey now, what's all this fuss about then?"

As we started to walk again, the cat leaped from the alleyway and stood in front of us; he sounded increasingly distraught. This wasn't a demand for a simple scratch behind the ears; he wasn't rubbing his body against our legs; he just stood in front of us, raising hell.

An old Imperial superstition held that you ignored a tortoiseshell cat's warning at your own peril. They were the third most respected class of cat after black cats and white cats. The cat lord had tasked us with punishing him individually, so it looked like his ranking in Marsheim's cat society wasn't all that low.

"Hey, Siegfried? How does the old saying go about cats and demands?"

“Hmm. Back in Illfurth they said when you build a new house, you should let the cat be the first one to cross over the threshold.”

“I’m not sure if it’s the one you are thinking of, Erich,” Margit said, “but ignoring a cat’s message will result in seven years of bad luck, or so they say.”

It was clear to me that this cat hadn’t crossed our path just for a few scritches.

“We left in good time, didn’t we?” I said.

“We did, but it wouldn’t be good for the boss to be late,” Siegfried replied. “I figure we’ve got thirty minutes or so?”

That would have to do.

The cat must have sensed our changing hearts; he dashed right back into the alley as if to say, “Follow me.”

“Look at him *bolt!*” Siegfried said. “I can’t keep up with four legs!”

The cat showed no indication of slowing down for us. Domestic cats couldn’t sustain a sprint for too long, but they could reach speeds of fifty kilometers per hour. This creature could clear a hundred meter dash two whole seconds faster than the fastest man on Earth.

“Grah, I’ve got armor *and* a spear weighing me down!”

That went extra when we were hauling all our equipment. Fortunately it had noticed how slow us mensch were and stopped every now and then to check if we were keeping up. It was clearer than ever that this is what it wanted from us.

“A *dead end?!*” Siegfried shouted. I’d had a bad feeling about this from the jump, and now it seemed like I’d been right.

We could only watch as the cat hopped up on a few barrels and leaped up and out of sight.

The wall wasn’t particularly high—perhaps a head and a half taller than me—but it was a big ask when we were as weighed down as we were. Still, I felt that we couldn’t waste time finding another way. This was no feline prank. Danger awaited; it was time for a couple of Fitness checks.

“Sieg, I’ll give you a boost!”

“R-Right, gotcha!”

I dashed ahead of the group, catching the wall and turning on a heel so I came to a stop facing my crew. I squatted down, placed my hands on top of each other and held them at knee height.

Siegfried passed his spear to Kaya before planting his left foot on my hands to spring upward. We’d practiced all over the city, driving the target number for this particular trick into the dirt. I could never have done it with someone like Etan, but with my similarly wiry comrade, it was a breeze.

“How difficult it must be to only have two legs,” Margit said as she gave Siegfried a hand up. This was very much her wheelhouse. She’d scaled the wall effortlessly; she could walk on *ceilings* provided they could bear her weight. I imagined that in her eyes us two-legger groundlings were perpetually bringing up the rear.

Stupid armor, I thought. *If I wasn’t wearing it, I could totally triple jump onto this.* Unfortunately, I couldn’t show off today. My Agility wasn’t bad, but not high enough to reclass into a ninja.

“You’re next, Kaya!” I said.

“O-Okay! Apologies in advance!”

After passing her staff and spear to Margit, she leaped off of my hands and scaled the wall with a bit of help from Siegfried. As for me, I distanced myself from the wall, did a run up and leaped into the air to grab my comrade’s arm.

“You’re...damn heavy!”

“Shut it! I’m light for my size, you know?!”

“Yeah, but your armor and sword’re a *load and a half!*”

Scaling a wall was almost a full action for us mensch, but it barely even registered as an obstacle for our feline guide. He was waiting farther down the path atop the wall, clearly impatient with us.

Ugh, I thought, *and I scrubbed up before leaving today and everything! If I don’t cast Clean before the meet, I’m going to be the scruffiest one there...*

Finally, we came upon the first trace of something genuinely wrong. Blood. And a lot of it.

“Whoever’s blood this is, they’re pretty badly hurt.”

“It doesn’t look to be an injured animal. It’s a humanfolk’s, I’m certain.”

The cat carried on, not sparing us a second look. As she spoke, Margit dipped her finger in the blood and sniffed it, not dropping her pace either. “Smells demihuman. A bestial race, most likely. If I had to guess...probably a bubastisian.”

I was always amazed at how much Margit’s nose seemed to tell her; it was only fitting for such a talented huntress, I suppose. She could track a person in the field just by letting the wind carry their scent to her.

“Around the next corner there’s an open space. Someone’s there; they’re moving,” I said.

The wall that we were running along functioned as nothing more than a boundary between residences. They weren’t roads and weren’t meant to be traveled, but you could technically cut across them if you were just desperate for a shortcut. The buildings in Marsheim were squished together and so we had to make our way forward in single file. The path split in two about twenty paces ahead—the cat juked left.

My mental map of this neighborhood wasn’t completely accurate, but from what I could remember, the buildings had sprung up here without much rhyme or reason, leaving an open lot bordered by houses on all sides; there was no way in without taking to the walls. It was about sixty paces across, but no one knew who held the lease to the land; it’d been abandoned and become a dumping ground for the locals’ garbage. Here stood Marsheim’s administration in miniature.

As soon as we found ourselves there, we would be open to attack from all angles.

“Let’s go. I’ll lead the way. You’ve got my back, right, comrade?”

“Tch... I don’t like this one bit.”

Siegfried kept pace, his spear at the ready, and although he was plainly disgruntled, he seemed on board with the plan. He'd been an adventurer for just over a year at this point, but his prowess had earned him a promotion to amber-orange—my friend knew that this situation stank to high heaven. I felt a surge of confidence that he would have my back as we headed into the unknown.

"Margit, maintain your height. No sense giving up a terrain advantage."

"Understood. What are you doing down there?"

"Whoever's there, we pacify and restrain. Focus on backing us up."

"Very good. On my life, none will walk in your shadow."

Much as I liked to complain about my luck, I had to admit I'd hit the jackpot with Margit—an unfaltering teammate, a lifelong friend, and nowadays a *remarkable* companion in bed.

"Kaya, you stay up here," Siegfried said. "Chuck a potion if it looks like we'll need it."

"G-Gotcha. Stay safe, Dee."

"Call me Siegfried. I'm gonna make sure I don't dishonor that name."

Siegfried and I—both blessed with someone who always had our back—nodded at each other, then moved into action.

The cat meowed in impatience. We turned the corner at full speed. Margit scuttled up and out of sight, and we dashed on trusting that she had our backs.

Siegfried was two and a half paces behind me. We were in a close formation to shield us from any sudden attacks, and to make sure that our first move wasn't spotted until the last moment.

The space opened up onto a heap of trash that had been evacuated out of the neighboring windows, and piles of scraps of clothes and other detritus that had wound up here on the wind. Amid it all, something quite horrible was happening before us.

It was Schnee, hobbling away from her pursuer. There was a deep gash near her left ear, and both of her hands clasped her stomach; blood poured between

her fingers. This was a *dire* wound; if her organs had been perforated, she had little hope for survival.

Naturally, I laid the blame on the bastard with the knife in hot pursuit. I couldn't make out the person's race or gender through their garb, but they were small—probably too small to be mensch. What I *could* tell was that they'd made a dire mistake. Whoever they were, they'd sorely miscalculated the risk of drawing the ire of Schnee's friends.

I leaped down from the wall and drew Schutzwolfe, keen to fell my favorite informant's attacker. As I drew near, I felt a change in the air. Someone else was primed to strike at me. Although I had the height advantage over Schnee's mysterious assassin, this *other person* was situated even higher than me.

Dammit! I was speeding forward with no way to change my trajectory. The moment you followed through on your resolve to strike was always the moment that left you most vulnerable. I had come into this expecting the unexpected, but to think they'd been *this* prepared for us!

I racked my brains in the few spare moments my Lightning Reflexes had bought me. I had two options ahead of me. I could twist my body as I fell and receive the incoming attack, or I could finally loose my magic and use my Unseen Hands to act as a platform to take another leap and evade it. *No, bad idea*. Both of these protected me but did nothing to stop the assailant going for Schnee. While I acted, she would be struck down.

"Keep going!"

It was Margit. I scrapped those other thoughts and focused on reaching Schnee as quickly as I could. If she had my back, then I needed to play my part too.

I heard the thud of one body crashing into another. Half a breath later came the clamor of metal on metal.

They *blocked* me! I'd gone in with the upper hand and all my focus poured into the blow—how had they *done* that?

Margit's warning must have given Schnee's attacker just enough time to register that they were being targeted. They had immediately shifted their

attention from their prey to protecting themselves.

The attacker clutched their dagger in both hands; it was a thin but robust piece. They wore a dark robe with long, wide-mouthed sleeves. It was difficult for me to make out anything from their appearance.

This was annoying. I knew that situational advantage wasn't everything, but I had a *gravity assist*. How could they have stopped me with just a dagger? As I put more strength into my attack, they used my force to drag their blade forward to escape from our push. They must have picked up a decent parrying or damage-reduction skill somewhere. I could sense that they would have preferred to have simply countered my attack, but had decided that falling back for a moment was the more prudent strategy.

I rode the impact into a somersault. It wasn't pleasant to land in garbage, but I preferred it to cracking my spine on bare pavement. My Parallel Processing made note of Margit, who was at the corner of my peripheral vision.

I was surprised—she was grappling with someone in midair. It was odd to see her using her dagger instead of her usual shortbow—usually that was reserved for breaking down kills for parts. Their descent was a lot slower than I expected, and not because of my reflexes—whoever it was Margit was fighting, they were using their wings to keep them airborne.

Their upper body was sort of spearhead-shaped, and they had more limbs than I was expecting. They wore the same anonymizing low hood and assassin's gear as their compatriot. However, from their pale green exoskeleton, their insectile body plan, and the long, scythe-like forelimbs lashing from their long sleeves, I could tell that they were a kaggen—a mantis-like class of demihuman.

You didn't see kaggen often if at all in the Empire. Their populations were mostly constrained to the Kingdom of Seine and the southern continent. What was this person doing all the way out in Marsheim?

"Grah! Stupid narrow alley!"

Siegfried finally entered the fray. He propelled himself from the wall with his spear in a leaping thrust...that struck thin air.

The assassin had ducked clear of the blow and, with a speed unthinkable for

an average mensch, they sprung forward. In the next moment, they leaped again and again, springing about at blinding speed. It would take an entire turn just to stop the assassin's movement.

"Siegfried, stay there and watch my back!"

"Got it!"

I wasn't asking my comrade to remain on standby; I needed him to deal with the sudden looming presence I felt behind me.

"Hmm..."

"Whoa, you're goddamn *massive!*"

From underneath a trash pile came a huge arachne who had been lying in wait. Siegfried readied his spear to take their charge. Even laid out flat, she was at least five feet around. Her sturdy legs told me she was some bigger sort of spider than an orb-weaver. A huntsman, maybe?

Between the kaggen and a huntsman arachne, it wouldn't be a leap of the imagination to think that the stabby little bastard was a demihuman too. They were lightning fast and light; their weight was clearly the root of the problem. No ordinary mensch was so light. I could get a decent slash in if they weren't so zippy! By the way they held their blade, I imagined that unlike the kaggen and arachne, they were a beast type.

What a bunch of dicks*!*

Schism, my ace in the hole, did wonders against armored foes or when I needed a strike that would skip past my opponent's DEF; it relied on me focusing my strength to a single point, rendering me vulnerable in exchange for a perfectly deadly blow. But with all that windup, I couldn't use it against someone this speedy unless I had truly seen through their moves.

This assassin was a fencer—they piled on loads of small strikes that they could use to force an opening by deflecting my attacks.

Siegfried traded a few blows with the huntsman before taking a step back to recalibrate, putting us back-to-back now in this suffocatingly constrained battlefield. At almost the same time, the kaggen's wings must have tired out;

they and Margit went crashing into a pile of garbage.

“Margit!” I shouted.

“I’m fine!” she replied. “Kaya! A-2!”

After a breath or two, our backup came like lightning.

We had worked out a range of shorthand signals so that Kaya could easily help us in the heat of battle without placing herself within firing range. From forty paces down the T-shaped walled path, the herbalist used her sling-staff to launch a bottle into the fray.

The crescent shape of Kaya’s staff wasn’t just a cosmetic sign of its power. She’d used its symbiotic fungus to create a pouch that could hold a bottle. In other words, instead of merely throwing her potions as she had done before, she could launch them far greater distances.

The crack unleashed an arrow ward. It was a reworked formula, and Kaya had outdone herself—we didn’t need to rub this one on. She’d done up the spell formula so that her friendlier potions would only activate for those within the area of effect with a Fellow’s badge. We would be safe from incoming projectiles from here on out.

In the next instant, four heavy bolts shot through the air and stuck themselves in a pile of trash a ways off. There weren’t four archers lying in wait; they had all been loosed by the same person. Upon the building on the far side of our impromptu arena stood a lone shadow. Margit must have spotted them just in time.

It was a vierman—a four-armed demihuman. They wore the same garb as their accomplices, but you couldn’t hide certain features that easily.

Come on! *This is way too much to take in! It’s been, what, twelve seconds since we came here; how do you expect me to keep up with this much new information in two rounds of combat?!*

“What’s...goin’ on?” Schnee muttered as she collapsed to the ground, finally spent.

We had to protect our target against four talented assassins—of course, we

couldn't rule out that even more were to come—and not only were we short on intel, we had to deal with races I knew next to nothing about. What kind of sick joke was this?

"Fancy seeing you here, my feline friend," I said.

"Erich..."

"Keep pressure on your wound and hold on. We'll be with you before long."

I pushed into Siegfried's back, and he caught on as we slowly shuffled toward Schnee. The small demihuman had moved out; now they circled us like a bird of prey, limiting our movements. We had repositioned somewhere where I could aid Schnee at any moment, but what to do next? I glanced over at Margit, who *—had the kaggen's left-hand scythe stabbed clean through her right hand, and was beating them back regardless?!*

Whether it was steel or flesh and blood, a blade couldn't cut if it couldn't move; more power to her for locking it down, but that must have hurt like a mother. I was blown away by her resolve. A kaggen's wrist claws were rugged and serrated; taking a blow from one of those would be like trying to tank a woodshop accident.

We need to make this bout a quick one. My partner had more raw power than a mensch, but her endurance was low; it couldn't be maintained. She was doing well to hold off the kaggen with her dagger in her dominant hand, but we didn't have a lot of time.

Schnee would have to grin and bear it just a little longer.

"Siegfried, make sure you don't take any hits directly to the skin, got it?"

"Poison, huh?"

Fortunately my beloved blade wasn't chipped or anything, but I'd noticed something foreign mingling with the rust-preventing oil that slicked my blade. It was as Sieg had said: poison. I couldn't read the pallor of Schnee's skin under her fur, but her expression gave away an agony that extended beyond the physical damage of the wound; she must have fallen victim to this same poison.

"That arachne uses a weird weapon too... Some kinda string trapped my

spear.”

“Garrote wire, I bet... A common assassin’s tool. What a mess... I suppose tortoiseshell cats are as much bad luck as good, but this seems like overkill.”

This would have been an instant total party kill situation for any regular adventuring crew, and to make matters worse, the combat encounter was loaded with grim win and loss conditions. There would be no limping away to fight another day here; if we failed here, we’d die. What’s more, we had no idea how many turns we had left before our ally breathed her last, leaving us with only a few venom-addled parting words to go on.

The GM really had it out for me this time. I couldn’t remember offering a single prayer to the God of Trials! But whatever. It didn’t matter if we’d known this was coming or not; if we were dumped into a sudden battle, then there was only one thing for it: eliminate every last one of them.

“I’m ending this in one strike,” I said.

“Who’re you taking?” Siegfried replied. “I think the arachne’s a woman; something about the voice.”

“Judging from our positions, I’ll take on the small one that I went for first.”

“Gotcha. You don’t wanna cheat on Margit with another arachne, after all...”

“We don’t *know* she’s a woman!”

We didn’t have long until they came for us again. Just as we were planning our next move, our opponents might change formation or who they’d attack alongside next. They could even choose to pick us off one by one.

A barrage of bolts from the vierman that signaled the start of the next round. From the way the bolts flew, I imagined that we were dealing with an Eastern-style crossbow, which could be loaded much faster than your regular crossbow. It still took a while, but the projectiles flew just as fast and just as deadly.

Our sniper had made a foolish error. The previous bolts hadn’t missed; Kaya had *redirected* them. It didn’t matter if you changed your target; the results would be the same.

This was one of the drawbacks of a long-distance weapon. You couldn’t

communicate with your allies effectively, and if they moved in unexpected ways they could fall victim to your own volleys.

The assassins moved in as the bolts scattered.

The short dagger wielder went for Siegfried and the arachne went for me. The fact that they lunged at us directly indicated that they didn't care which one of us they hit—a kill was a kill. Even as they came at us from opposite directions, I could tell that they were confident in their ability to coordinate well enough not to hit each other.

It was the best move in this situation. But tackling it wasn't impossible.

"As expected!" I said.

"Yeah, yeah!"

We were well trained and in sync—we could change formation on a dime and change our targets freely. Back-to-back, we each spun in a half circle, and rushed forward, pushing off from each other.

Our enemies had been taken unawares, but they kept up the attack. Either of them could get behind us and take out Schnee. No, they were really talented. If they were this good, they could easily kidnap her. But why hadn't one of them swept in to take her while the other three piled it on? If they did, we'd have had little recourse.

I didn't like this. At this rate Schnee would die eventually, but it looked like they wanted to finish her off themselves here and now. Even if dead men told no tales, their corpses could leave clues. Clearly they wanted to leave as little evidence as possible.

I was impressed by their ability to maneuver across all this rugged terrain. It was a waste. They were skilled and could really do some good; it was such a pity that their talents were put to use in places like this one, that they would never leave alive.

They cleared the gap in almost no time. The small assassin thrust with their envenomed dagger—such an open strike that it seemed like they didn't care if I parried it or not—and I did something just a little bit sneaky.

“Your greatest weapon is secrecy against your foe” was a saying from the School of First Light—the cadre committed to the containment of magic knowledge above all else. Lady Agrippina had taken a page out of their book when she’d commissioned me to hide my magic. The long and short of it was that I should only reveal my hand when the circumstances called for it.

The assassin grunted as I parried their attack; their voice sounded like a young girl’s. I couldn’t afford to show any mercy; I dropped into my usual relaxed posture before stepping into a long, upward diagonal arc.

They had probably wanted to get their next move in ahead of me, but they’d faltered, and now I could read them like an open book. Another thrust came in the next moment, but I deflected it with my gauntlet before winding up for another slash.

I wasn’t working on pure physical reflexes alone here. I was using my Unseen Hands to guarantee their strikes never hit as I closed the gap between us.

As we moved, I grabbed their leg, making it seem as if they tripped up on something in the trash heap, while keeping my mana waves down to a minimum. Fortunately, the residual mana from Kaya’s potion was still scattered about; only a Collegiate professor could have picked up on the second mage in our party.

I deflected another strike with my gauntlet. I couldn’t go overboard with this—I couldn’t afford to accidentally kill them.

Our assassins here wanted to silence Schnee permanently, but what this told us was that she had information that was worth killing her for. If I wanted this little birdie to sing, then I had to refrain from ending their life. Maybe a lost limb would loosen their lips? As long as they didn’t bleed out, they could tell us as much as we wanted. Maybe it would be better to really put them on the ropes by inflicting a little more physical punishment to really get them to talk. They were a dab hand at working in the shadows—I doubted they would allow themselves the shame of being kept prisoner. Then, maybe...

“Whoa!”

I felt my blade find purchase in flesh. I had easily cut through their cloth armor, chosen to limit their movements as little as possible, and hit their left

forearm.

Th-They're mad! They moved their body just before my hit connected and used their arm as a shield!

My strike landed true—too true. It was trivial to cut through someone's arm, but they had placed their own blade lengthwise across the arm just in time. They could deflect my strike as soon as it hit. This was a mad strategy; usually it was impossible to pull off through the pain of being cut. Most would flinch or drop their weapon. Unfortunately for me, their resolve was unbending. They took the hit and parried me, and so the battle continued.

The impact of the strike meant that I'd pushed them farther away from Schnee, but they were still difficult to pin down. I didn't even have the spare presence of mind to ponder whether to use my magic to retaliate.

"Rah!"

I wasn't sure what was going through their head, but as they jumped back with a gaping wound in their left arm, they launched a dagger at me. They were at the perfect distance. As it spun toward me it would have sliced through my carotid artery unless I moved my head away just in time.

I had been just as ready to lose a limb or two to win this bout, but they evidently had a lot more on the line. A number of my Unseen Hands had formed an invisible wall around Schnee, but I felt my heart pounding heavily with these mad strikes.

This was going nowhere. They had gotten out of range again. I needed to check how my allies were faring too. I didn't need to crane my neck around; I used Farsight—again I thanked Kaya's potion for hiding my mana output—and got a bird's-eye view of the situation. Everything moved in tandem as I took five seconds to survey the scene.

I didn't know what had happened to Margit, but her hand was *still* stabbed through. She had used her legs to grab onto the kaggen's other scythe, pushing her foe into a stalemate. Margit had the advantage, though; she was battering her foe's exposed face with the pommel of her dagger. *Attagirl*.

Yet the kaggen wasn't flinching. Maybe their night-black shawl covering their

face was a magic item; each of Margit's strikes made an awful *crunch*. Margit's foe was taking the hits *with their jaw.* Hell, maybe they were relying on some kind of unique kaggen trait; I'd never met one before. Maybe they had mandibles like sepa did?

Siegfried was grappling with the arachne's wire, but he'd turned it to his advantage. After letting his spear get caught up in it, he wrangled it around like a fork twirling up some spaghetti in hopes of mangling it beyond use. Anyone who knew the weaknesses of a spear had thought once or twice to throw their jacket or something at it to annoy their foe, but Sieg was skillfully exploiting this "weakness."

Come on, we just need one more push...

"Kaya!" I shouted. I needed to send a signal to her. "A—"

I wanted to call in a tear gas potion, but before I could, *another* projectile landed in the small yard. I was the closest. It was a shiny black ball. In the next second it erupted in a cloud of white smoke.

"Smoke screen, huh? Dammit, no good!"

"Watch out! Don't breathe it in!" Schnee shouted, spitting flecks of blood.

I was too close and couldn't react in time. By the time the message had entered my head, I'd taken in a mouthful of the stuff. Immediately my vision started to sway. The colors blended into one another, and I felt as if icy needles were coursing through me.

I fucked up.

This wasn't your regular smoke screen. This was *aerosolized Kykeon*.

With my color perception thrown out of whack and my proprioception busted, I felt my consciousness daring to slip away. I clenched my teeth and steeled my focus, forcing myself to keep my stance no matter what.

I felt it seeping through my Insulating Barrier. The white smoke was chewing away at it as the safe zone around me grew smaller. I hadn't foreseen a battle today, and so I hadn't applied any of Kaya's miasma-warding potion. I was regretting it now. Sure, there hadn't been any time to prep it, but I still cursed

my folly.

Thankfully my allies had the benefit of distance and had responded to Schnee's warning quickly. Siegfried stopped trying to wrench the wire from his foe and covered his nose and mouth with his sleeve; Margit gritted her teeth and pulled her hand free before climbing to higher ground.

Our scout had chosen to retreat because she had realized that whoever had thrown the Kykeon bomb was a new enemy; she sped off to protect Kaya.

That left me with one thing to do.

I poured all my efforts into oozing out a killing intent, a threat to cut down any who would dare approach. I usually made an effort to keep my claws retracted, as it helped make my strength difficult to read. Even if I wasn't going to lash out, I forced out all the furious killing intent I could—indicating that I would cut down any who stood in my way.

I was in no mental state to use magic, but my Divine-level hybrid sword arts, honed to be almost instinctual, combined with Overwhelming Grin—something I had decided was worth getting last year—made me seem about as deadly as I could possibly be.

It was sad to say, but I was bluffing *hardcore;* hopefully it was enough to give the impression that I wouldn't let the smoke affect me.

"Your parlor tricks won't work on me. If you want to keep brawling, then I'll take you on. Run home. Lick your wounds. Unless you'd rather...?"

I controlled my ragged breathing to avoid taking in any more of the smoke than I should. Forcing my base reactions down like this sent pain through my muscles, and the hallucinations were threatening to make me lose any sense of ordered space, but I refused to let my posture waver. I needed to show them I could fight at any second.

As long as they ran off, then we could save Schnee and pick up the scraps of a victory. *You can do this, adventurer.*

It felt like an eternity, but in a second we no longer had to worry about the Kykeon. A sudden hurricane came blasting through the spaces between the buildings, sending the smoke away—away from the yard and out from my body

too.

“UGH! I hate hate HATE this!”

It was the wailing voice of an angry girl. Lottie had come to the rescue. Only I could hear her, but everyone else could feel the manifestation of her anger.

Lottie was a sylphid. She must have sensed that I’d caught a lungful of Kykeon and gotten rightly furious that the element she so favored had been tainted in this way. It was evident that she didn’t like the drug all too much.

“It stinks; it reeks; it’s just super yucky! Go away! Go awaaay!”

With a roaring gale that would have blown off my helmet if I hadn’t tightened the straps, she cleared the air of any last trace of the drug. The trash was lifted up into the air, and I had to squeeze my eyes shut to keep the dross out of them.

“Why’re you doing this?! Autumn is when the air’s fresh and feels the best! DON’T ruin it!”

It was a pure, unfettered rage. An alf’s anger peaked not when they sought it out, but when their sphere of authority was infringed upon.

Lottie had been captured and put in a special cage, all for the sake of “research.” She spent decades forgotten in a secret room which stank of mold and decay, with only the energy to sleep. All the same, she hadn’t held all too much anger toward this. Lottie knew that wind was omnipresent and sometimes settled—it was probably just tiring. That was why she had described her imprisonment as “nap time,” despite Ursula’s chagrin. She’d never uttered a single complaint about her time spent locked away.

This was nothing like back then. Her power was incredible. Although Lottie usually flitted around, as capricious as the air itself, she lived on a different plane of existence from us humanfolk—the strength she wielded was mind-blowing. If it were only our enemies here, I wouldn’t be surprised if she could lift up the entire block with this power.

“And how *dare* you do this to our Beloved One!”

An alf’s power was stronger the more abstract their domain was. Wind was

something that blew over everything, that resided everywhere. I made a mental note to never be fooled by her cute demeanor ever again.

“Grr! I’m so mad! I won’t ever forget this!”

Lottie kept the wind stirred up as she carried on with her adorable tirade. By the time it settled, the only people left were four very dazed adventurers—harmed but not beaten—and one barely breathing informant.

We hadn’t managed to kill our enemies, but we had prevented them from achieving their goal and severely injured one of their own. This must have been a good opportunity for them to make a run for it. Or maybe Lottie’s wind had blown them away. Whatever the case, they were gone.

“H-Hold on a second...”

I had seen this kind of scenario at the table. The GM was putting this long campaign on hold! We had clashed with some tough foes, they had suffered quite some damage, and the GM was like, “Okay, let’s wrap things up for today and return to this story later!”

“No way... This was just part of the setup...?”

I wasn’t sure if that Kykeon bomb had been thrown to buy their allies time to escape or to help them take us down, but man, who throws something so deadly you need to get an alf involved at your average Level 1 Fighter?

“Erich, are you quite okay?!” Margit said as she dashed toward me. She must have assumed my daze was due to the drug. Only I had been able to hear Lottie, so I guessed my companions all must have assumed a sudden spot of bad weather had saved us.

“I don’t know where all that wind came from, but if you inhaled that smoke then we should get you to Kaya right away...”

“Ah, no, it’s okay,” I said. “It didn’t reach my lungs.”

I was more worried about my partner. She had taken on a foe three times her size. It looked like she hadn’t suffered any wounds aside from the one in her hand, but that wasn’t much cause for celebration. The scythe had gone through her palm between her forefinger and middle finger. It was a more gruesome

wound than I had expected, and I almost felt I could see through to the other side...

“But Margit! Look at you! Oh man...”

“I’m all right, Erich. Kaya will patch me up. More importantly...”

Without so much as flinching at her battle wound, Margit went to Schnee. Margit put her finger up to Schnee’s nose and sighed in relief—she was breathing.

“She’s alive, but only just. We need to prioritize her above all.”

Th-Thank goodness—she’s alive! She’s just slumped there, so I feared the worst.

“Kaya, hurry down! I’ll catch you,” Siegfried said.

“Okay!” came a reply from a short ways off. Our resident healer had sensed that something was off from our little localized freak windstorm and come closer. It looked like she could tend to Schnee right away.

As Kaya looked at the wounded informant, my thoughts drifted to the enemy. The four of them had been tough, but who had the fifth person been?

I wanted to grab my head in despair. What a mess this whole thing was becoming. I didn’t need more puzzles and mysteries to ponder over. The eventual goal was the same—cut them all down—but the journey there was getting awfully convoluted.

At any rate, we were a mess, and it was looking like it would be difficult to stick to our original schedule like this. I hated to change plans at such short notice, but I would have to get Etan to lead the Fellows and apologize on our behalf.

I would have to give a report too. Schnee hadn’t just been poking around at empty rumors. Weaponized Kykeon had been powerful enough to draw a forced end to our battle. She had been digging on our behalf to bring a solution to this situation, and that had probably put a target on her back.

Today the blood-covered bubastisian was wearing a simple maid’s outfit. It was slightly different from the one she wore before, so I imagined she must

have been undercover at a different manor this time.

“Kaya, will she live?”

“Her wounds are deep and her pulse is racing. I think she might have been poisoned,” Kaya replied. “I hope my new formula will work.”

The herbalist cut off the patch of clothes around Schnee’s wound with an obsidian knife and examined the wound as she searched for something in her waist bag. She pulled out a potion bottle and poured a gelatinous light-green substance onto Schnee’s wound; it looked like it *crawled in*. I took a step back. If this hadn’t been one of Kaya’s concoctions, I would have totally thought it was some kind of combat magic.

“Wh-What was that?” I asked.

“Dee told me once that if your intestines are ruptured, you’ll die even if you stop the blood. He was completely right, so I decided to make a potion that can clean you up on the inside. I thought if I used an algae that could move on its own, that would speed up the process.”

A moving algae? Like euglena?

During our time on the battlefield I had told my comrade about wounds—ones that were fatal and ones that were not. I was impressed that my little tidbit had come in handy now. These two were always so damn creative. *Who decides to make a cure that* moves on its own, *just hearing that?*

“It should help close the internal wounds too.”

The College had undertaken a similar avenue of research into battlefield medicine; their results were a lot more rough-and-tumble. You would use your Unseen Hands to enter the body via the wound and cast low-yield Clean spells to eliminate pathogens while preserving the microbiome. It required multiple simultaneous spells and a delicate touch; it wasn’t the sort of thing you could trust students with.

This was a far more elegant solution—using the flagellum-based movement of algae to perform a similar function to slimes. I was ready to be the first person to applaud her if Schnee survived this, but I couldn’t help thinking how noisy the line of potential customers begging for a sample would be if word got out.

“I haven’t had a chance to test it, but it should at least stop the bleeding. It’s better than the bandages or tourniquets we have right now,” Kaya added.

“Ah, then you should be able to patch this up nicely too,” Margit said, waving her right hand—*please stop that, your hand’s barely held together by a thread...* Kaya looked at it and furrowed her brow.

“I can stop the bleeding right away, but I’ll have to stitch this up. Um, Margit? Can you feel your fingers?”

“All five of them. I’ll do anything if it means patching this up.”

“All right, I’ll bandage it up for you for now. What a terrible wound... Let’s work on stopping the bleeding.”

As she fussed over the wound, Margit merely laughed.

“Better this than what you mensch women go through the first time *you* get penetrated,” she said with a snicker.

I had heard that women were far more frank than men when it came to dirty jokes, but we had just survived a battle where a single misstep could have killed us—this was not the right time for that. No... Maybe it was the release of the stress and the joy at having survived that had brought out this side of her.

“Hey, Kaya? Should I move Schnee?” Siegfried said.

“H-Huh? U-Um, j-just a second!”

See, instead of showing how well you are, you’ve just made the poor girl awkward.

“I th-think we should l-leave her there f-for now! She’s got w-wounds aside from the one on h-her stomach! A-And I’ll check for p-poison!”

“Gotcha,” Siegfried replied. “Think we should wrap some bandages ’round her stomach too?”

“Y-Yes please! Th-Thanks!”

And look, Siegfried didn’t even hear you! You’ve just flustered Kaya so hard she looks like she’ll burst into flame...

“Margit?” I said.

“Hee hee, yes, yes, I apologize. I think I was riding high on the knowledge that I came out the other side of today alive; my words got away from me.”

Margit was wearing a mask that covered all but her eyes, but I could see a red flush at their corners. It looked like she wasn’t lying about the excitement of survival.

“My opponent was quite the hunter too,” Margit went on. “I couldn’t sense them at all until the moment they attacked me.”

“Even you?”

“Once you reach a certain point, you can reduce your presence to that of a rock or a plant. As soon as you strike, that’s when the illusion is broken. Mother called it ‘becoming a tree.’”

I shivered as Margit told me how Corale had perfected her ability to hide her killing instinct. Judging from how none of us could sense or see the person who’d thrown the smoke bomb, that person must have been of a similar level. I had my own moves that let me shut down my enemy’s reactions, but it was disheartening to think about being on the receiving end. And they had *five* trained assassins? *Give me a break... I can’t get a second to catch my breath.*

We needed to either wrap up our eventual second bout with them quickly or create a situation that made killing us not worth their while. It was a tortoiseshell cat that brought us into this mess, but it was up to us to sort it out.

“Hey, what does the cat lord want from us?” I asked the cat. He had disappeared for the duration of the battle, but here he was again next to Schnee. As he sniffed at her, all I got in response was a golden-eyed stare.

[Tips] Cats are always watching. It is a cat’s responsibility to keep an eye on the sort of evil that cannot be overlooked.

Middle Act

GM Soliloquy

From time to time a GM might take a real shine to an NPC. Beyond involving them in the main story, they sometimes create reams of background text for them. At tables where character information is shared on cloud-based services, the players may stumble upon such troves. While this is good for world-building, players can sometimes be taken aback by just how much love and time is poured into what is, in their eyes, some random NPC.

Schnee knew nothing of her origins. She had probably been born in Marsheim, but she didn't know exactly where or when, or even who her parents were. All she knew was that she was found abandoned in a dirty alleyway, mewling all the while.

Her adoptive family was perennially strapped for funds but rich at heart. Their home was a cozy little neighborhood called the Gutterwalk. A fair part of Marsheim's sewage system opened up onto it; the locals, hoping to spare their poor feet, laid down an ever-shifting, ever-renewing network of loose plank walking paths. The stench of the place kept the authorities and the city's money at a distance, and so the shantytown had remained basically unchanged for generations.

It went without saying that the locals didn't have the best prospects. Just like the tent grounds outside the city, it was a nesting ground for penniless newcomers and those who could not or would not dare name their hometowns or their legal parents. All the same, these were not mean folk. They found it in their hearts to take up such a small bundle of white fluff—scarcely more than an ordinary kitten, really.

The Gutterwalk was no place to get an education—nor even to pick up a confident grasp of standard Rhinian, given from how far and wide its people had come. Still, despite the gallimaufry of foreign tongues in which she would

be raised, Schnee's adoptive family had chosen to give her a name that, to the best of their knowledge, sounded suitably Rhine-ish and reflected her snow-white coat. They had no notions of the name's grim implications—snow's painful chill or fleeting nature. Many had never *seen* snow before.

Schnee treasured her name in spite of the cruel laughter it attracted. She might have been born into humanfolk society and forced to deal with all the suffering that entailed, but the short, sweet nature of her name felt like a mark in common with her smaller feline kin. People liked to name cats based on first impressions, and so in the Empire you would get cheeky cats called Schelm or sweet ones called Hubsch; many black cats ended up being called Schwarz and white ones, naturally, tended to earn the name Weiss. Schnee saw no shame in receiving the same treatment. People liked strays and ferals better than people in the same conditions.

Schnee had a rough and deprived upbringing, but she'd been *raised*, not merely tolerated. Her family taught her to read and spell in spite of their rugged port speech. She felt blessed. From the Gutterwalk, one could see quite clearly the multitude of worse fates that could have befallen her.

Fortunately for Schnee, bubastisians could stomach raw meat and spoiled food better than mensch. What stunted her peers let her flourish, to some limited extent. Her fellow orphans came from a whole range of different races—poverty showed no favor to any particular race, it seemed. By the time Schnee was eight, she had the strength of an adult. Bubastisians lived to about fifty years at most, but that meant they developed faster too.

Despite the plethora of races in Marsheim, none of them seemed to know the trick to guessing at a cat's age—one could speculate based on coat quality or size, but at the end of the day it was all speculation. It was no easier with Schnee. Most couldn't even discern her sex. From early on, she never struggled blending in with folk who were far older than her.

More than anything, it was her height that let her pass unnoticed among the adults. She hardly had the stature of an eight-year-old. Again, Schnee didn't mind so long as it meant she could start giving back to her family all the sooner.

They might have lived in filth and squalor, but the people of the Gutterwalk

fought to live upright lives. To Schnee, the whole neighborhood was like one big family. It was only fair that she give back. Her whole life had been defined by a community where everyone shared all that they had.

When she was finally old enough to do more than simply mewl, Schnee decided to find a job more suited to a bubastisian than stealing or scrounging. The first jobs she took on were naught more than pest control. It paid poorly, but no one else wanted to do it, so the orphan quickly found herself a niche. Marsheim had a dense population and many a bolthole where vermin hid and bred. Most were happy to pay a few bronze pieces to make their problem go away.

As she worked, Schnee noticed something. When she called out to people they often jumped. Even when she was standing in front of someone, they would often look right through her. For some reason or other, people found it difficult to pick up on her presence. Her inborn lack of presence was further muffled by her quiet step (thanks to her paw pads), her nearly nonexistent scent (thanks to her grooming), and something ineffable in the way she moved.

She'd begun life as a vanishingly small thing, easily crushed underfoot. To walk anywhere in Ende Erde, she'd had to learn by heart how to be *out of the way*.

Even if she didn't know the logic behind it, the young Schnee soon put together that a girl of her talents could make a real profit.

"Listen up, Schnee. No matter how teeny somethin' may seem, hardworkin' folk have scrabbled together to work and get it. Don't you be goin' and doin' *anythin'* underhanded, y'hear me?"

Old Man Stump, a mensch gentleman who'd come by the name thanks to his missing right hand, had told Schnee—and anyone who would listen—that it was the gravest of wrongdoings to steal from another. His hand had been taken as fair and legal punishment for thieving—no one knew the exact details, but it couldn't have been worth more than nine drachmae, or the law would have taken an arm—and although Schnee would only learn as much when she was older, she'd taken his words to heart from the beginning.

Evil only begat evil—such was the gospel of the Gutterwalk, and so she never

dared to set foot on the darker path.

Her community understood all too well that the moral axiom “first, don’t get *caught*” only applied to those with a degree of social cushion; among their own, any misstep could end in lifelong regret. All that they could cling to was the prospect of a just life, albeit a humble one.

“Schnee, you be careful of what you say, okay? Words are easy to say but impossible to take back.”

So she’d been advised by an older girl with cropped hair. She’d told Schnee to never speak ill of a person’s demeanor—to their face or otherwise. It was a foolish gaffe, and it had cost her a head of hair she’d prized and cared for her whole life.

“Don’t be fightin’, brawlin’, or thquabblin’ with folks. Screw up and thith ith what it’ll get ya.”

So an older boy had told her, pointing to his missing front teeth. He had lost them when he had tried to break up a fight among some other kids. He was a tough lad, and he’d come out on top and in one piece—but a few days later they’d jumped him and plucked all four of his incisors as penance.

“It’s a sad fact o’ life that ya can’t buy trust, friendship, or someone’s life with pocket change. But you can sell yours. If you sell somethin’ that you can’t buy back, then it ain’t *ever* comin’ back,” so on went the advice she received.

Everywhere you went in the Gutterwalk, there was family to be found who were marked or missing parts or both, and they always had some kind of moral lesson to impart—the tattooed uncle, a young man with only one eye, an older girl with only three fingers. It was common practice in the community never to shy away from one’s ugly history. Like everything else, it was to be shared to the benefit of one’s neighbors and one’s children, that no one should repeat their mistakes.

At the heart of their stories was the lesson that never stepping off the straight-and-narrow path was the best and simplest solution.

Schnee never doubted the truth of these lessons, but she thought that it would be far more difficult to accept your failings and mistakes. How painful

must it have been to bear a permanent reminder of your crime on your body, for you to reappraise every single day of your life? And then to not even be ashamed or grow depressed, but to announce that it was only the cost of your own foolishness?

Schnee had vowed to never taint her hands with evil and to use what skills she had to make an honest living. Her decision was to deal in rumors.

Schnee had often listened in secret to the songs in the plaza. She knew quite well that information could fetch a high price depending on who it was sold to. The poets and the muckrakers were always hungry for a choice cut of verified gossip.

Schnee had earned her first payout proving that a tavern owner had been falsely accused of watering down his drinks. She would never forget the generous weight of the silver coins that the newspaper reporter had given her.

The people of Marsheim *always* had cash to spare for trustworthy dirt. But there was never enough time to double-check everything. The legwork, the endless background checks of one's sources, it was a complete job in and of itself. There was a *market* for trust, Schnee had realized. *Everyone* wanted a specialized informant—someone who could keep them a step ahead of their rivals and unburdened of doubt.

Of course, she remembered the advice of her friend with the cropped hair and always made sure to keep a wide berth from the world of scandal. She would have been more than qualified to sneak into even the most guarded of manors and collect all sorts of dirt on various nobles' affairs and love lives, but this was not the upright work that she valued.

Schnee was happy with her coat—her current life, in bubastisian terms—and her town. She made it her mission to never bring shame to her family and to make sure Marsheim was always plentiful with cozy places to nap.

It was perhaps two years into her career as an informant when it happened. She was ten years old and proud of the work she did, never having once stuck her nose into a dirty affair even if the payout was big, yet she would never forget that summer. It was sweltering; she was grateful for her white fur.

That day had been as brutal as any before it since the season turned—the day

her whole family was killed at the hands of a group of adventurers.

Schnee knew that her good luck alone had spared her. No, she hated to call this turn of fate *good.* By the time she'd got wind of what had occurred, it was already too late.

She had been working. The heat of the day had worn her out, and so she'd taken a quick nap atop a tower on the other side of town, enjoying the reprieve of the evening breeze. When she had returned to the Gutterwalk the next day, she saw the blood and the bodies.

Schnee had lost everything she loved in one short night. The safest, most comfortable of her places to rest, among her family—nothing remained of it.

It wouldn't have taken a talented informant to put the story together. By the time she had reached the truth, she almost wished that it had been harder—at least then she could have buried herself in the work. It only took a quick circuit of the neighborhood to check for survivors, noting the people from neighboring residences peeping through their windows at the scene.

The cause of the incident was painfully, heartbreakingly dull. Another informant working in Marsheim had done a poor job, to put it lightly.

A string of merchant families had been robbed, their storefronts burned. Arson invited severe punishment for people of *any* class. What was more, the fires were merely a cover for the murders committed within. The government had handed their sentence down plainly, severely, and in public, to be carried out the moment the perpetrators were found; the Adventurer's Association piled in as well, offering the princely sum of thirty drachmae for the bunch, dead or alive. It'd been more than enough to put a thrill in the heart of your typical adventurer.

And out of all the adventurers who'd come out of the woodwork to find the culprit or culprits, one group had come to an informant who, for lack of a better idea, pointed them along to the Gutterwalk. *Her people. Her home.*

Schnee knew that all but the children of the Gutterwalk had well-known criminal records. They'd made an easy scapegoat for an information broker looking for a quick payout. His own lack of forethought had sent all her family to an early grave.

The adventurers had blindly believed the informant and assaulted the neighborhood without even bothering to talk to the residents. People were cut down indiscriminately as the party raided homes in search of evidence. They must have been certain the evidence was there. The culprits had been sentenced to the chopping block anyway—better, then, to silence the rabble so they could search for the stolen goods in peace.

Yet no matter how much they looked, they couldn't find a scrap of evidence. The people of the Gutterwalk had been poor, but never quite so poor as to repeat old mistakes—certainly nothing so dire as arson, murder, and grand theft. It went without saying that they were innocent.

All the adventurers found was a little bit of money squirreled away during the summer so that they could buy firewood come winter.

One lie had killed an entire community. An incompetent rumor peddler and a pack of credulous state-approved murderers had cost Schnee everything she held dear. She didn't even get the catharsis of claiming her revenge on the informant—he had already died before she had the chance. The adventurers had panicked when they'd failed to turn up any evidence, and so in a fit of madness they dared not leave a single witness alive. This included the foolish informant. There he was, a man she had never seen before, lying in a pool of blood in her family's home, his face frozen in an expression of utter disbelief.

The world was a cruel and unjust place, to take away the prime object of her hate, his life snuffed out by the close seconds.

Schnee was in no position to claim what little of her justice was left. She hardly measured up against a pack of unhinged career killers.

And so, before her dead family and all the evidence she needed to grasp how the deed was done, she could do nothing but cry—just as she had done on the day they had found her.

Yet the world was not built upon tears alone. Sometimes when everything is lost, something new is given back. Just as the adventuring community had taken her home from her, so too was it an adventurer that had reached out a helping hand in her darkest moment.

"I wouldn't advise leaving the poor souls like this. We should give them a

proper send-off.”

“Who...are you?”

“My name is Fidelio. Fidelio of Eilia. I’m an adventurer.”

The one who had stood before the weeping Schnee was a young saint, Fidelio. This was not yet the Fidelio of legend. He’d not yet had his fabled night of righteous justice. From his frayed sleeves and simple spear, he looked, to be frank, quite the scruffy man of the cloth.

Fidelio, the saint whose virtuous heart had set him apart from any parish, had shown his kindness through his deeds—he’d gathered up the bodies, already starting to decay from half a day in the merciless sun, and carried them to an empty plot.

“Quite the group of excited youths had left the Association, chatting of hitting upon quite the important job, but none of them came back,” Fidelio said as he worked. “It seemed strange, so I came to see the situation for myself. To think it would come to this...”

Bubastisians were hardly the sturdiest folk, and so Schnee could only watch Fidelio carry the bodies, unable to lend a hand herself. It was evening by the time Fidelio had brought all the bodies to one spot. He was covered in sweat and grime. The sweat was unavoidable in the heat, but Fidelio remained steadfast as the blood and offal of the poor souls that he transported covered him.

Through it all, the young adventurer never muttered a single word of complaint, nor did he treat the bodies with less care than they deserved. After all, Fidelio knew most of all that the bodies of the deceased were not dirty things. Funeral rites were performed for both the dead and for the living who were left behind.

As he’d carried his load, Schnee had told him what had happened. Her voice faltered. Now and again she broke down midsentence. She’d never have behaved this way in front of a client. Fidelio’s heart burned as he listened to the tale. The saint knew quite well how arrogant one had to be to offer sympathy or pity; it was too awful. Even he, a stranger who had come by chance, knew that nothing he said could ever be enough to fill the gap in Schnee’s soul.

It pained him still to say nothing at all. He'd come on a whim, and what he'd seen was beyond the worst he could have imagined. People would have called him callous and cruel for staying silent. It was a heavy trial indeed for the saint who worked diligently to live an upright life, spread the creed, and build a better world.

Despite it all, even the God of Trials did not hand down such burdens without some faint sliver of hope.

"I hate to be the one to tell you this, but I don't think the authorities will put much manpower into investigating this," Fidelio said. "Any amount would surprise me, really."

Marsheim's guards were for display only, to put it bluntly. Adventurers filled the gap in many cases, but it was a sad fact of life that many citizens of Marsheim, often the poorer ones, were left by the wayside. That went double for the social pariahs of the Gutterwalk. The local guard would not only refuse to investigate, but any complaints or requests to do so would fall on deaf ears.

Not a single guard had come to investigate the killings, despite almost an entire day having come and gone since the inciting incident. It went without saying that those who lived nearby had filed at most one or two reports and were simply ignored.

There was no glory or reward to be gained from an investigation. The facts were plain; nobody who cared mattered, and no one who mattered cared.

Even the Adventurer's Association—led by Maxine's predecessor, as she'd only been an assistant manager at this time—didn't want to associate itself with such damning incidents, so there was little hope of them being proactive.

It would only have amounted to any sort of scandal if there was a *losing side*. In this case, there was no losing side—anyone who might have lost anything was dead. As long as Schnee kept her mouth shut, everyone could move on as if nothing had happened. The foolish adventurers would receive their due punishment, so the wisest thing for her would be to avoid losing face.

All the victims were beneath notice anyway. It was an *accident*. Condolences were given. This was a vice that lay in the bureaucracy of Marsheim, but the death of ex-convicts wasn't worth labeling as a crime.

Such incidents weren't rare. It was hardly unprecedented for a bad tip-off to cause a few civilian casualties; sometimes a few bloody-minded fools led a raid they shouldn't have and racked up collateral damage. This was no just world, and given the choice between punishing the occasional wrongdoer and protecting lives, the Empire chose the former every time. Unless you had the power to stand up and do something about it, then it would be swept under the rug as if nothing had ever happened.

"I may be an adventurer, but I am a priest of the Sun God first," Fidelio said. "His word is quite clear in this matter: no light shines without casting a shadow; the just have no place without an evil to conquer."

"That's a pretty cruel motto," Schnee replied.

"Unless you yourself claim your justice, those who glut themselves on evil will inevitably run free. We are neither omniscient nor omnipotent. All that is left to us, perhaps, is meditation and enlightenment."

The Sun God, and once upon a time even all of the good gods of the world, saw mortal suffering as the entry fee for one's place in the world. Whether you cried or prostrated yourself, the gods would merely continue to claim that human affairs were for humans to manage—save for those situations the gods could not afford to ignore.

Some called such cosmological conditions a state of absolute freedom. Others denounced the pantheons for Their irresponsibility. However, the fact remained that humans were the arbiters of their own paths.

"I heard that in the myths the gods made us folk, Their final children, out of all Their best qualities. In light o' that, this whole thing jus' seems like a cold slap in the face. 'S a damn shame ta think that creatures with all the gods' *best parts* could do...all of this."

Some would have raked Schnee over the coals for her blasphemy, but there were people of the cloth who did not turn a blind eye to the cruel realities of the world. They understood that the world was full of suffering, that people weren't equal—some races were fated to be weaker than others, or were only given shorter lifespans than others—and saw where the blame fell.

Fidelio was one such person. He did not blindly recite the passages of his

god's scripture; real faith demanded sharper thinking and a more studied understanding of the substance of his creed. He couldn't say a thing to this poor laywoman who berated the gods for leaving the people of this world with its inherent suffering.

Fidelio believed that the gods didn't want to pen a tale of a world where everyone lived in peace and happiness without complication. No, They wanted to make a world where those who lived in it understood the heavy responsibility that came with life itself.

"I mean, it's true that all my folks...did some bad stuff. They knew that most of all. But...it's all too much fer me to take, y'know? The gods sure are cruel..." Schnee said.

Fidelio was a devout believer in the Sun God, but he'd felt no desire to sermonize to this poor young woman. The parental gods had created this world as a place which would passively permit tragedy—which would, in fact, *create* tragedy as an inescapable fact of life, and the reasoning behind this intention was far too grand, a truth that was too distant for even the most sage theologian to ever reach.

Bubastisians did not usually shed tears in times of sadness, but still Schnee cried.

As a mere mortal, Fidelio decided that fulfilling his role was the only way he might bring her peace.

"O Sun, Great Father of us poor and lowly beings... In the fading twilight of Your shining rays, please hear my prayer."

Funerals in the Empire were always held at dusk, when both the sun and the moon occupied the same space in the heavens. This fleeting period of alignment was the moment that the power of the parental gods, They who presided over time and life, was at its fullest. There was no time more fitting for Their children, the mortals of this world, to receive their send-off.

Fidelio laid down his spear and knelt upon the ground, praying to the evening light that bathed the ridgeline of the city. He did not have a staff, but his right hand, laid over his chest, clasped at a holy seal. He jangled its ornamentation.

In his left hand was a bag of cheap incense, which he carried with him at all times. Even without his incense burner, his god answered his prayer; it lit with a flame that did not burn to the touch. As the heliotrope crackled in the Sun God follower's palm, the incense began to burn with a sweet smell.

"For these people who lived their lives to the fullest, striving with ceaseless labors just as the Sun rises in the sky, I beg that they may receive Your everlasting accompaniment and a moment of repose at our Dear Lunar Mother's breast."

Fidelio had placed the bodies of all the deceased with their heads facing west, into the sunset. In an official funeral, their appearances would be cleaned up, an item they held dear would be placed alongside them, and then they would be cremated or buried. Each one of these people had lived in poverty, and so they would have to receive their last rites as they were. Fidelio's request for a miracle had been answered—both the Sun God and the Night Goddess must have smiled on this act, even if another priest might have thought otherwise.

"As the Sun sets on this day, just as You settle down to sleep, I pray You give these souls rest and Your mercy. In the name of Your everlasting teachings, amen."

In answer to Fidelio's prayer, just as the sun passed under the horizon, in that moment where the red sky transitioned into a deep blue, the bodies burst into flame.

It only lasted for a moment. Such funereal miracles were conjured by His most devout and highest-rank priests. A priest under another god would have taken thirty minutes to do the same, even with a pyre. In Fidelio's case, it came and went in a blink of an eye. The poor souls' bodies were reduced to ash before Schnee could remember to breathe.

"Ohh... My family..."

"They met with an unexpected end. Let it be some small comfort that their souls will be guided without fail to my God."

Neither of those two would know, but in a world far from theirs there was a religion that believed that when the souls of the most moral went to heaven, they would be exempt from the journey after death and be welcomed by their

god directly. The scene before them was quite similar.

This did not come without cost, however. The request had required quite some obstinance on the priest's behalf. Fidelio would keep this secret from Schnee, but in the ten days afterward he would take on a personal ordeal to go without sleep and stay upright the entire time.

"Now... All that is left is to decide what to do with your soul," Fidelio said.

"Mine?" Schnee replied.

"Yes. Your desire for revenge drove you to tears. But the ones you wish to punish will probably have already received quite the punishment in the lap of the gods by now."

The priest pointed at the piles of ash that had once been a community—strangely enough, despite the evening breeze, they remained still—revealing that the body of the informant, killed in the adventurers' tantrum, had remained unburned.

Fidelio's finger was, most likely, not an invitation to pray for him.

"They are still out there—those fools that I loathe to call my fellows in business," Fidelio went on. "What shall you do about them?"

Schnee wanted to give in to her sadness and her rage and cut them down as they had done to her family, but seeing what the priest had done for her family, she realized something.

"I'm gonna get my revenge. Them fools ain't worthy of walkin' under the heat of the sun nor the cool of the moon."

"Then..."

Schnee cut Fidelio off. She presumed he was about to announce that he would join her. Schnee was an informant—she had her own way of finding revenge.

"I'm gonna lay every li'l thing about what happened clear. The ones who did this and the ones who looked the other way—they're all gonna fess up to what they did and apologize fer it."

Schnee vowed to bring to light every baldfaced lie and ugly truth that had led

to this moment. She would identify every single adventurer who had played a part in this vile tragedy and let the wave of public scorn that would be sure to follow consume them. For those who would look away, who would write it all off as too much to bear, then she would annihilate them in her own way, to punish them for not doing the right thing when they had the chance.

It was no excuse to say they didn't *know*. Willful ignorance was a crime in and of itself. To choose the easiest solution without a thought for what horrors it might incur was lower than low.

Schnee would dole out a punishment worthy of their crimes. She'd drop them into a living hell. When she returned to her trade, she would do it knowing that she'd embodied the highest virtues of the calling.

"I grew up blessed by their lessons—not t'steal, not t'be violent, not t'speak badly of people, not t'do anything I'd be ashamed of. If I killed 'em, whether it was by my own hand or through another, my folks'd be spitting nails and hellfire."

Schnee's sole path forward had to be one that only the truly evil could cast doubt upon.

"Very well. You have quite the stout heart."

"I ain't strong at all... Jus' can't let go of my good learnin'. But I'mma try ta do my best to make sure nothin' like this happens again. That way, I bet they'll tell me 'Well done' in the moment that I change coats and move on to a new life."

The laypriest of the Sun God kept silent. Though he couldn't quite square it with his own faith, he knew the bubastisian creed well enough, and he too had seen in the cat lords some spark of the divine. He had even heard that the calamitous great wolf, dressed in the great cloak of the Imperial house, exuded a divine aura of its own. There was more to the world than any one notion of it could hope to contain; if her beliefs gave her peace, Fidelio had no cause to complain. He was an advocate for his religion and its virtues, but evangelism was a step too far.

"Good point. I suppose I ought to make sure my own information networks are as reliable as you," Fidelio replied. "And if it'll help, I'll crush every guy I meet peddling junk intel."

The informant laughed.

“What’s goin’ on? You helpin’ a gal out ’cause you got a bone ta pick with the authorities?”

“My moral compass is my own. No state holds a higher place than the sun and the world it shines down on. Now then, there’s someone you ought to meet. She’s a hard worker in the Association, and she’s got the gray hairs to show for it. She’ll get your story straight with the bureaucracy.”

“Hah, now that sounds like a party. Give her hair some more time an’ we’ll be two peas in a pod.”

Schnee was sure that her family would approve of these methods.

She had lost her home, and it would never come back. But there were still places in the city where she could nap in peace. It would be her job to protect them from the ravages of all the other liars and craven killers.

“Ngh...”

Schnee felt her consciousness bob back to the surface. The last traces of that dream of her past faded into the sight before her. It was evening, and the room was lit by candlelight. The sky was a blend of crimsons and navy blues; just like the night that she was born.

“Ahh... Guess I’m still kickin’, huh...”

All the pain she’d been unconscious for registered in one fierce jolt, but it was nothing compared to the fatigue pinning her to the bed. Schnee put on a gently weary smile as she realized that, once again, life would go on.

Long ago now, she had gathered up her family’s ashes, placed them in an urn, and buried them in the home that had brought them all together with a simple grave marker. From afar, she could almost hear them saying, “It’s not your time yet.” When she’d dragged herself through that trash-filled lot, she’d thought her time was up. Her wound had throbbed and her body had ached with exhaustion from the endless pursuit, but here she was. Her body was so heavy that it didn’t feel like her own, but her heart still forced blood through her veins.

The dream had been bittersweet. Your life was supposed to flash before your eyes right before you *died*, not when you barely hung on.

Schnee sighed. “No good... Still gotta get some more good deeds in, huh...”

Schnee had picked up some valuable intel, and it was a blessing that she had survived, because she hadn’t had the wherewithal to write it down at the time. All the same, she felt an incredible weariness at the prospect of having to carry on another day. She had worked on a number of cases which had saved the margrave’s hegemony in the past, but it had been a while since the last time she had faced such evil and resentment.

“Dammit, Fidelio...”

Of all the new adventurers in Marsheim, he’d *had* to ask her to befriend *that* one.

The first time Schnee had laid eyes upon the gold-haired adventurer, she had

sensed a similar aura to Fidelio's. The one difference was that she sensed that even *nine lives* wouldn't be enough to take on the man's *heaping misfortunes*.

That wasn't all. Fidelio and Goldilocks were both zealous in their pursuit of justice, but it seemed that where Fidelio imposed endless strictures upon himself to embody his ideals, Erich would do *anything* to achieve the ends he believed were best.

No, that wasn't quite right, Schnee's feline senses told her.

Perhaps Fidelio and Erich had different goals altogether.

Why else would he, a lowly amber-orange newbie, decide to build a clan and drag her into this realm of danger and subterfuge? The normal sort of rookie that came to Marsheim would know their place—they would run crying to Fidelio and ask him to sort things out, asking for a job that was actually suitable for them.

Schnee let out a little yawn as she reflected on Erich's propensity for chaos. Nevertheless, she came around quickly. Ever since that day, she'd known that she had chosen a life that brought more loss than gain. If she started complaining now, how would she ever be able to rack up good deeds to put forward when she changed coats?

Schnee tried to move, in vain. She was simply too beat and too doped up on painkillers. She tried craning her neck for a better view of her situation. On the bedside table was a pitcher of water, a glass, and a little brass bell. Affixed to it was a little piece of paper that read "Ring me when you wake up." The penmanship was clearly Goldilocks's.

"Jeez, fine, fine... He *did* save my hide, so I should at least show him what I found out."

The bed wasn't bad, but it wasn't quite to Schnee's tastes. Schnee pushed down her feline urge to lounge and rang the bell.

[Tips] Violence is the simplest way to solve a situation. However, should the target of your violence ever be misplaced, you can find yourself going from adventurer to criminal in an instant. An upstanding PC should take care to

note that not every piece of information supplied by the GM is meant to be taken on its face.

One Full Henderson

Ver0.8

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 ver0.8

1.0 Hendersons

A derailment significant enough to prevent the party from reaching the intended ending.

The Empire possessed a vast territory, and so each of its borders were a potential front line. The lands that bordered it to the north were a particularly dangerous frontier.

Due to its proximity to the polar region, the merciless sea that bordered this frozen, almost unlivable land was home to ice floes all year round. Sweeping shoals and steep cliffs lined the shore, preventing the creation of any ports.

Port Schleswig, the sole open-sea port that the Empire possessed in this area, might have been in an ice-free region, but the angry waves, rough currents, and ice floes further out meant that it was dangerous to head out anytime other than the relatively short summer here.

Not only that, the northern peninsula—a forest-coated region in the continent's northeast—jutted out into the water, making access to the open sea far more difficult. The narrow strait in between was populated by small islands and rock reefs, making passage across it incredibly dangerous. Trade didn't flourish there.

The terrain wasn't the only danger that plagued these waters. The locals' vicious raids troubled the surroundings all through the year, but grew ever worse as the summer solstice approached.

It was these peoples of the polar region, the northern isles, and the peninsula who threatened the seas of the Empire's northern reaches. The Imperial nobility had always seen these folk as simple barbarians.

The Imperials borrowed a phrase from the Orisons that grouped these northern realms—excepting the furthest isles—all together as Nifleyja. Roughly

translating to “the gloomy isles,” the appellation was a subtle nod to the Empire’s willful ignorance of the region’s true nature—what more was there to know, besides that they were a dire place to live?

The Empire didn’t view this treatment as particularly derogatory. It was hardly *untrue*, after all, that the locals lived on loot and plunder; why *not* call them a pack of barbaric pirates? Their nations were forged through might alone. In fleeting moments of peace, some might have elected their kings, but more often than not their thrones were but gaming pieces, passed from neighbor to neighbor in bloody contests of succession. It was custom for the losers to accept defeat with grace in the moment and plot their next conquest when the moment passed and the dust had settled.

If you were to push a hard-line Imperialist to admit everything in their heads, they would no doubt say that the *very culture* of the northern sea-reavers, known as Niflings—people of the gloomy isles—was a rallying cry of *More land! More wealth!* In short: they were the enemy.

The nomenclature referred to a wide span of people and territory, but the people of the Empire cared little. In their eyes, any who sought to widen their territory through invasion were Niflings. A more measured observer might recognize a certain shared warlike spirit and bottomless desire to expand in Rhinian and Nifling alike, but the irony was lost on the average Imperial.

This hypothetical outside observer might similarly express some confusion that a state as cosmopolitan as the Empire would maintain such a xenophobic position, but the Empire was hardly the only melting pot—in this world or any other—that had embraced such an attitude first and foremost to serve its desire to consolidate power. No state, no matter its makeup, was any different in this matter. In the face of such profound imperatives, nearly any contradiction becomes easy to swallow.

So instead, consider how strange a sight it is, through your average Rhinian’s eyes: here are your neighbors, already busy with trade between the farming and fishing seasons, taking valuable time out of their year *plundering* each other. It was unfathomable! Stealing from the folks next door and selling their goods as your own—well, that was just unheard of, if they had the same flag and lived behind the same border! It was *banditry*, plain and simple.

Of course, there were some for whom this all made perfect sense. Warriors imbued with martial might often decided to “export” their services to lucky nations among them. The situation was only made all the more awful when you realized that they did not travel alone—they often brought their whole settlements or nations with them, with dreams of ever-growing gains. There could be nothing in worse taste. To top it off, although various strategic bases had their own high king or lesser king, these were merely the overseers of their discussions. The fact of the matter was that they had no power to control or call off a raid.

This brand of territorial expansion was integral to Nifling culture*;* it was bigger than law, bigger than politics—settler expansionism was what they *did*. While the high kings that led these campaigns would make nations in the isles or the peninsula and claim their hegemony, the *individuals*, the warriors that fought in them, would not allow anything to inhibit their ideals of independence and self-reliance.

Indeed, one such high king, having declared that his people should refrain from raiding their neighbors in order to open diplomatic channels with the Empire, was dubbed a coward by his people and killed in cold blood by his own brother. Such was history—no one person, no matter how great, could alter the course of such a singularly bloody legacy.

The endless succession of tribes and chiefs and high kings gathered at the gates, seeking to stake their claim despite all their predecessors proving little more than grist for the mill, was a perennial thorn in the Trialist Empire’s side.

A previous Emperor had squeezed as much as they could from their administration’s meager coffers to flood their naval budget, throwing envoy after envoy into the northlands’ waiting mouth in the hopes that one of them might eventually open peace negotiations and secure safe trade routes without appearing to threaten the power base of the extant leadership. Now, several Emperors later, the project continued, as it always had, poorly.

The fact of the matter was that these regions shared a continent—nothing more, nothing less.

The Empire had no interest in assimilating the isles directly into its holdings.

Neither would it have been a long-term solution to welcome the northern rulers as nobles—no one could erase the fact that these people had willingly attacked Imperial ships. Under these circumstances, it was no surprise that the Empire had all but given up on the northern trade route.

It was nothing more than pure grit that saw the Niflings through. Survival in their lands demanded it. If that made you a pirate, so be it. No settled Rhinian farmer, comfortable in the care of their civil bureaucracy, could be expected to understand their way of life as anything but barbarism—but were you to make them eke out a living on the frigid coasts for but a year, they might begin to understand the appeal of such a mercenary philosophy. Compared to Rhine, the region was naught but a desolate wasteland, full of sheer cliffs. The isles (another land that Imperial subjects laughed at the sheer hilarity that people would *choose* to live there) were lush by comparison to Nifleyja. They lauded them as a fertile paradise.

Even in summer, the days were horrendously short. Winters were so cold that even the heart of the earth seemed to freeze. The land was barely fit for agriculture. The ice-cloaked mountains and the deep forests denied any attempt at cultivation.

The polar region was so barren that even one of the hardiest crops, buckwheat—interestingly, Imperials loved gruel made with barley, but called buckwheat gruel “inedible slop”—would refuse to yield an edible crop.

Such was the lot of the peoples of the polar region. Their land refused hearty survival, so it was no surprise that they would take to the seas to claim more fertile lands for themselves.

This tenacity in pursuit of their shared dream led to the invention of a vessel that bought them dominance over any Imperial incursion: the longship. With a low draft and a standard width from bow to stern, its structure was the culmination of generations of growing mastery of the known world’s fiercest waters. By sacrificing load space for sea readiness, they could cut across the surface with ease.

There was one such fleet forging across the icy strait, armed and loaded for bear. This fleet in particular consisted of eight longships and four knarrs—ships

designed specifically for carrying away the loot. Equipped with both sails and oars, they could ride the waves at astounding speeds.

This fleet was manned by a melange of mensch and other races. A careful eye would have noticed the barrel-shaped cabins affixed to the bottoms of each ship's hull and drawn along in tow. These cabins were designed to aid scouts and couriers blessed with the gifts of the sea-dwelling kiths. In the case of this particular ship, dozens of merfolk and selchies bode their time inside.

These cabins were no place to lounge. Their sole purpose was to house yet more booty and serve as mooring stations where the amphibious crew could stop and catch a breath without being taken by the waves.

The water was the remit of these races—although selchies could live on land too—and unlike mensch, they could easily see underwater, meaning they could spot a ship from miles away. In particular, selchies—a race that looked like a massive seal had sprouted two hind legs with a layer of loose skin from their necks down, covered in a slick fur coat that protected them from the water—could hunt at even the darkest depths of the sea. They were also blessed with fiendishly precise hearing. Their skin, which looked like a mensch cloak, made them appear fat from afar, but they had a similar skeletal structure to mensch.

One such selchie had opened his cloak-like skin and was grasping at a rope dangling off the side of the ship. Then, with a surprising agility for their weight—anyone needed some level of fat to protect them from freezing in the icy sea before you could count to thirty—he leaped up from the water onto the deck.

"Cap'n, incoming ships! Four of them!"

"Oho, very good!"

The selchie was talking to a huge, dark figure standing near the mast who replied with a mighty roar. The captain of this fleet was a brown bear callistian—known for making their homes in the deepest and most frigid of boreal forests. His gallant form weighed no less than thirteen hundred pounds, and his chain mail armor would be impossible for an average mensch to so much as carry.

"What manner of ship be they?" he bellowed.

“Merchant ships, by their clip and how low they sit in the water, Cap’n! No oars on them. I’d figure they’re Rhine-built.”

“Allll right!”

Otso the Red, the ringleader of this plundering excursion, let out a booming laugh that shook his immense frame.

“Set sail, ya bastards! Man the oars—full speed ahead!”

Otso’s booming voice, befitting his incredible size, reached the ears of every ship without the aid of magic or miracles. The rowdy sea dogs took their positions and heaved at their oars to launch the ships over the waves.

Every sea-dyed scalawag among them roared with laughter. The icy northern sea felt small beneath them. The thrill of battle and the chance to cut loose made them giants at heart.

Plunder; murder; eventual death—these men’s creed was to find joy in all of this. Then, after a splendorous death in battle, their souls would reach the lap of their chosen god. After a welcoming feast, they would be inducted into Eilifhalla, the eternal manor, and they would be blessed with the chance to join the happy fray, pitted against the armies of the other pantheons.

For those who suffered any other kind of death, their souls would be reborn upon the frozen purgatory-plain of Nifleyja. There was no fate more grim. A gruesome death at the end of a sword was far preferable, given the reward on the other side.

All the same, these were no sober ascetics sworn to the next world. These were folk of the flesh, here to sample the many happy turns of mortal life. They enjoyed the rush that came from striking down their foes, the weight of gold in their hold, and—if they were lucky—carnal pleasures with women. For the Niflings, these pillaging excursions were their heart and soul, the great joy to be wrung from this life.

Plunder was ingrained in their very souls. Even if, like today, their journey had begun with the aim of trade, they could not in good conscience say *no* to prey that no one would sorely miss.

The Niflings had some semblance of a conscience. A Rhinian ship hardly ever

carried families, and that made them practically guilt-free raid prospects.

Imperials were renowned for their might on land, but out here in the open water, their strength paled in comparison. Precisely why wasn't obvious—perhaps their ship-building technology was still in its infancy, or maybe they'd simply outsourced their shipping to the nations who made their home around the relatively calm Verdant Inner Sea.

Whatever the case, choosing to rely on sails out here in the north was a fatal mistake. Those who lived here knew that you needed proud muscles behind the oars and a sea breeze that would ruffle a valkyrie's hair to truly dominate the water.

Guided by their selchie scout, the fleet sped away from their supply ships and cut across the water like an arrow. Their scouts had never steered them wrong. As long as they kept pushing on, they would be sure to run straight into their prey.

Small shapes began to appear on the gently curving horizon—Imperial sailboats, and not modest ones. Such short, stout vessels had clearly been built with gentle cruising in mind, with their two masts and broad sails. The sailors must have been just as soft. These ships were slow in a headwind; the Niflings would catch up to them in no time.

Even at a height disadvantage, a raiding party had a bounty of options when it came to taking another vessel. A nice ramming maneuver would get them screaming. Their sails would need to be rejiggered, and with the weight of their cargo slowing them, they would be as helpless as a suckling pig trussed for slaughter.

"Look—the Imperial flag! This ain't our fellows' booty, so show 'em no mercy! Full speed!"

With the cry of their captain, the pounding drumbeat rose to a frenzied pummeling of the skins. Their foes had no doubt spotted them by now. They needed to close in, denying them any window to turn tail and run.

"Sing a prayer for our unending glory! For our undying souls! Carried by the winds of battle, let our glorious song reach the ears of our great god and our battle god!"

With this cry, the poets and shamans began to chant—their booming voices and heavy melody rupturing the air. It was unthinkable to the gods of the Rhinian pantheon, but the war songs of the Nifling poets were petitions for miraculous intervention; a great force from below carried their boats yet faster, apace with the groans of the shamans.

In this part of the world, magic and miracles were as one. As long as they were used for the sake of battle, then the gods didn't care—just as They minded little whether sacrifice came to them as pork or lamb, so long as it came from something that *bled*.

With the approaching clamor of battle, the Imperial fleet turned their prows in terror. But the wind was on the Niflings' side. Their foes would not be able to outmaneuver the incoming fleet. The Niflings would reach their enemies, and their pledges to their gods would call up a rainbow bridge between the boats, leading the first wave of warriors onward. Enemy fire and magic would blunt and fizzle against them. The battle would be a purely martial clash, pitting these warriors against one another strength for strength.

It was almost time. Their prey was nearly within range. The scouts dived into the water. They were powerful warriors, and although they couldn't rip through a ship's hull—not that they'd want to when it would ruin the loot—they could head to the broadside portholes and use their harpoons and arrows to stop their enemies from manning the sails. It was the job of a Nifling scout to break their enemy's spirit and block every escape route.

They had headed into the water before the battle began and were powered by the thrill of the fight; they never had the chance to notice that something was off. The first indication was a few splashes of something being thrown into the water—a huge earthen pot sank deep into the sea. In the next moment, the scouts could hear nothing anymore. They wouldn't feel anything anymore either. A massive explosion eliminated the dozens of scouts lurking underwater in an instant, casting loose fragments into the air amid a pillar of sea spray.

"Th-The hell is going on?!" Otso roared. Something was clearly amiss, but he and his ships were still a few minutes away from reaching their target.

A few moments later, the corpses of his scouts bobbed up to the surface.

Their bodies had been mutilated, their insides seeping out from holes all over their bodies. It was impossible to tell what exactly had caused this gruesome sight.

Of course, the huge explosion was at the root of it. Although Otso wasn't to know, the pot that the Imperial side had thrown in the water was designed to explode after reaching a certain depth—the perfect tool to combat water-dwelling races.

The Empire called them "depth charges."

Their cases were designed to help them sink quickly. Inside were bombs inscribed with magical tags. The fuses were connected to the ship, and so when the charges reached a certain depth, the fuse would come out and they would explode. A simple but effective design.

The sight of the explosion was all the more impressive through the water than out in open air. The hole that had momentarily opened in the sea filled quickly, causing the nearby waters to swell dangerously. It was similar to the ripple of a rock thrown into the river, but on a much grander scale. Unfortunately, the scouts had already left the safety of their boats. There had been no hope for them—the might of the explosion was enough to kill a sea serpent, a creature similar to a lesser drake.

"Captain! In the shadow of that fleeing ship... Look... Warships..."

"Grah..." Otso could but groan.

The situation turned from bad to worse. As the merchant ships continued their slow escape, three towed warships were cut loose. Their hulls had been coated in a potion of silence, which came with the added benefit of rendering them waterproof. Each pounding stroke of their oars came and went in silence. It was as if they were phantom ships; they surely looked the part. The alchemical treatment had stained them black as pitch, and they flew a black flag bearing the profile of a goddess in white.

"That's... That's...one of the Furies!"

"Th-The Grinning Fury! Tisiphone's leading the vanguard!"

"The g-goddess of murder! There's only one man who would dare raise that

flag...”

The smiling goddess upon the lead ship’s flag wore a hair decoration that looked for all the world like a deadbolt—a blatant indicator of Her power. Feared as a Fury in the northern peninsula, the goddess carried a fearsome reputation even in the Rhinian pantheon that had spawned her. She was a bringer of vengeance, a companion to all who sought to buy peace of mind and rest for their weary soul with blood and fear.

Tisiphone wasn’t worshiped by many; most tried to keep their distance. The only time you would pray to Tisiphone was when you had lost something very dear to you.

There was only one absolute madman who would gladly raise Her flag.

This was the symbol of an adventurer who had appeared fifteen years ago, crushing every pirate that crossed his path, filling the bays with red blood. He was a ruthless man. Every attempt at parley, he met with grim, grinning silence. Once a high king had placed his crown at his feet, in a feeble motion of surrender, but the cold-blooded adventurer merely crushed it under his foot. This man who killed for honor, his hair dyed red with blood, was said to be cursed by the god of battle.

The Niflings knew him by many names, but the one they knew best was *Erik* of the Songless Sword.

The Niflings valued strength and valor regardless of who was fighting for whom. Their most valiant enemies earned a place of honor in their songs. This was simply their way. Some outsiders might have thought it odd that they would sing the praises of their prey and wonder what it would do to their morale, but such folk would fight all the harder to match the praise they offered.

But this slaughter machine had fought with such eye-diverting brutality that none of the Niflings *dared* pen songs about his conquests. His name—not his birth name, it was said, but one given in the language of the isles—had become a cursed thing, not fit for one’s own children.

Upon the prow, Erik shook his flowing, bloodstained, golden hair. His menacing smile, his cheeks flush with blood—he looked just as much a Fury in

person: the worst nightmare of all Niflingkind.

He knew that mercy to his chosen prey meant a swift, honorable death in battle and a place in Eilifhalla, and so he denied them the chance. Those he fought, he would capture and execute in his own sweet time—a fate the people of Nifleyja would not have imposed upon their worst enemies. No matter how much gold they offered, the titles of kings they surrendered, Erik's blade showed no mercy to the terrified warriors of the north.

Due to Erik's handiwork, the northern sea had grown a lot smaller than it had once been. He haunted the Schleswig Peninsula, naturally, but sometimes he would be spotted at farther shores—even as far as the isles or the pole. Stories of his might had struck such fear into the Nifling clans that some had turned away from raiding entirely.

This nightmare, the man who'd broken the very traditions of the far north, stood right before their very eyes. The black ships were still in the distance, but as both sides sped toward one another, they were soon within beckoning distance. There was no chance of turning back now.

Otso the Red had earned his epithet from years of bloody battles—the gore so plentiful that it had managed to dye his black fur red—but even this battle-hardened warrior had not earned such a blood-soaked legacy as his enemy's.

Erik's stain went down soul-deep; he was it, and it was him, and anyone fool enough to aspire to such a terrible position had him to unseat.

"Captain! Your order?!"

"W-We can't fall back! Push forward! Ain't a body aboard who hasn't lost loved ones to that blackhearted bastard! We ain't got time to change course anyhow! ONWARD!"

Otso felt his morale vanish in an instant, but there was nothing for it at this point. It was said that Erik had the power to alter the winds to always give his own fleet a favorable breeze. In the face of that, Otso could do nothing but press on.

They would valiantly fight to win or be welcomed into Eilifhalla.

Pirates were strung up and executed without question in the Empire. This was

almost as shameful as ending yourself by your own hand, whether by suicide or imbibing poison. They would dishonor their ancestors and fellows if they were forced into such a cowardly way out.

“We’ll bring an end to this bastard’s story TODAY!”

The callistian gripped his family axe in his hand as he steeled himself for battle.

[Tips] Raids are a common tradition among the tribes of the peninsular region and the boreal lands. The raids are chiefly for the joy of battle, but the plundered goods are collected and sold elsewhere. Achieving great military feats during these raids is a Nifling’s greatest joy.

These people might have had the misfortune of being born in such a frigid wasteland, but poverty and unhappiness is not cause enough to pardon such misdeeds.

“Admiral! The enemy aren’t pursuing the main fleet! They’re engaging with the support fleet!”

“Is that so?”

Rhine never ceased inventing; the specter of obsolescence hung over all their creations—but few quite so closely as the sailboats bought from the shipwrights of the Southern Sea. The supreme commander of the Imperial shipping fleet, a bird of prey siren, let out a mighty sigh.

The admiral was getting on in years now, but throughout his tenure his diligence had never ceased, despite the fact that his role was barely respected within the Empire. It was a splendid fact that he would later report that he had completed his task without losing a single ship against a fleet of eight enemy vessels. The admiral shook his head—he was letting the imagined eventual scenario grow into something bigger than it was. He had tasked his adventurer with protection while he sailed his ships safely out of danger. Semantically speaking *he* had completed the task, yes, but it would be arrogant of him to take all the credit. The admiral looked out at the surging waves as he let out a self-deprecating laugh, feeling the ache of his age—the same ache that had

made flying too much of a chore for him.

It was approaching thirty years since he had first started serving the Emperor in the Imperial High Seas Fleet of Rhine—the grandeur of the name was always said with a touch of sarcasm as the navy was barely anything to write home about—and he wasn't sure just how many times he had been a target of the Niflings' plunder in all that time.

The first time had ended in a terrible loss. The pirates had sailed up the Rhine River, and the subsequent battle had left them with significant casualties—a superior officer and half of his fellow new recruits killed among them. He had believed that they had driven these barbarians out of Great Mother Rhine's namesake, but during the next expedition to the northern sea an unexpected assault had led to a close-quarters battle. Half of the crew had perished in the time it took for reinforcements to arrive. They had been unable to sail back themselves, and their ships had been forced to be towed back by their backup.

Fortunately the admiral had never once faced the shame of being taken prisoner, but Rhine's victories upon the high seas were painfully few and far between.

The Empire was no transient nation-state. It was a grand country whose history and traditions spanned five centuries! Disgrace was the only word to describe the utter despondency he felt at loss after loss against barbarians from a land where even the goats were too underfed to bother eating.

Constant losses led to increased funds from the Imperial coffers as the political administration attempted to solve the problem. They developed safe canals that would lead to the ocean and purchased ships from neighboring countries with experience in building reliable crafts, but it was a painful fact that this did nothing to put an end to the barbaric pirates and their raiding tradition.

It went without saying that the Empire would never lose to the people of some puny peninsula in a land battle. This was no shameless conceit born of empty arrogance; in the past, one of the region's high kings had gathered together an army from the surrounding satellite states and raised a flag in rebellion. It had been easy for the Empire to exploit the distance involved to cut

off their supplies and secure a sound victory. They had lined up thousands of heads along the shoreline as a symbol of their might.

Yet the sea was a different beast. It was too wide to properly fortify. Out here in the open water, these untenable raiders had an undeniable advantage.

These people had no central administration, no fixed habitat; they killed and looted as they pleased before heading to wherever home may be without looking back once. It was impossible to take preemptive measures against such impromptu violence.

These people of the sea were violent, sometimes not leaving a single witness or scrap of evidence behind, and the Empire was all but powerless. Rhine had claimed a few victories putting their magia to work on the waves, but the kind of steady, unwavering defense they needed escaped them. Wielding their full might was like using a battle-axe to swat a fly.

Funds and manpower had been channeled into building fortresses along the coastline, but the army couldn't act as efficiently as it usually did. Their usual tactic of securing a base and the fact that they had to engage with lightning-fast ships meant that they were unused to the task at hand.

There were many who rallied against the northward incursions. What was there to gain from occupying that peninsula and the frigid polar region? The costs would skyrocket in securing the victory, and they would only get higher when it came to managing the damn place. The regular people would only see their taxes increase and their bellies empty as their money was funneled into a hopeless endeavor. There was no prospect of produce or crops to boost the Empire's economy, no geopolitical gain from losing their buffer zone. The famished land would simply be a burden.

Even if Rhine chose to occupy the region, for the Niflings, raiding was part of their very culture—it would be a far, far more difficult conquest than any of the previous satellite states that came before it. Any who would be dispatched out here would view it as a demotion or even punishment—or maybe both. The nobles knew that they could easily be dispatched out to this icy hellscape, and so each and every one of them gave a firm no to the occupation of the peninsula.

A familiar expression came to the admiral: “Like a poisonous fish which has forced its way into the net.” Poisonous fish were naturally inedible for humanfolk, but there were larger sea creatures that enjoyed feasting upon them. The admiral, like other Imperial nobles, was strong with rhetoric but poor at putting complicated emotions to words—the somewhat contradictory nature of this whole business was hard to explain.

“But...Your Excellency... What is that?” the officer who delivered the report asked.

“What’s what?” the admiral replied with a moment of confusion. “Ah, you only just transferred over from the capital, that’s right. I suppose you hadn’t been debriefed beforehand.”

“I hadn’t, no...”

The rookie officer—the third son from a knight family who had joined the navy for the free room and board—was still learning the ropes. He was still shocked that the scene unfolding before him was nothing like the rumors in the capital had made out.

The support fleet that guarded the main fleet was made up of a mere three ships. While they were of the same design as the ones belonging to the raiders—specially designed for close combat—the enemy had more than double the number of ships. The Niflings’ fleet was composed of rowboats called karvi, which had sixteen men manning the oars and nine souls or so left free to occupy themselves with bleaker business, as well as two drakkar ships—larger “dragon” crafts, each needing thirty-six warm bodies to work the oars! What could the support fleet do against a force more than five times their number?

“It doesn’t seem *logical* to me. How can he choose to plunge headfirst into that nest of sea wolves? Is he *mad?*”

“A foolish question,” the admiral said with a sigh.

“Excuse me?”

“I’m saying that it’s foolish to judge whether Gallows-Mast Erich is *sane* by Berylin standards.”

The admiral looked out at the ship leading the charge, where the bold

adventurer stood atop the wolf-shaped prow. The admiral and the adventurer had been working together for more than a decade now.

This strange fellow had come from the Empire's western reaches to its northern tip to beat back the pirate threat upon the icy seas. In the eyes of any from the High Seas Fleet, the man was a singular oddity, plain and simple.

"What he's doing is dispensing justice for all who live in northern Rhine," the admiral went on. "Many'd call him a hero. He doesn't balk at the raiders coming when the sowing and the harvest season's passed, and he keeps the waterways safe for us."

"A hero, you say?"

"Indeed. But a vengeful one, aye, that I'll confess—but not without reason. Do you know just how many cantons these lootin' bastards hit each year?"

The young mensch officer shook his head. Fifteen years ago, he had probably only just stopped suckling at his mother's breast. But the admiral couldn't credit all the lad's ignorance to the folly of youth. The Rhinian government kept tight-lipped about the terrible state of its northern border—the shame of such an abject strategic failure would only be a political liability if it were better known. Only the locals knew the true state of the northern reaches, and they never felt the urge to raise a fuss about what was happening. Anyone would be ashamed to see their own territory be so viciously preyed upon.

"We're looking at twenty, thirty, maybe more—all laid to waste. Their ships have a shallow draft, and as you can see they man their oars with quite the strength. Each and every man on board is a hardened fighter. It's a culmination of their worst and most deadly vices. They will raid and plunder anywhere the water will take them."

"Anywhere...? Do they sail upstream too?"

"That they do. Worse, their ships can be carried across land if need be. We've seen these folk sail up a lightly guarded river, cross overland to the next waterway over, and ride it south to raid where they oughtn't be able to otherwise. They use the trees as cover; even dragon cavalry can't spot them."

"That's terrible..."

The Niflings were feared for their combat power, but also for their versatility. They were known to temporarily abandon their plunder to haul their ships onto their shoulders and cross *mountains*. This ability to move as they pleased let them strike at nearly anything. No one knew exactly how many cantons had suffered at the hands of their rampages. Even Imperials who have lived long lives of peace quivered in fear at the possibility of a Nifling raid reaching their home.

"Their drakkar can house up to a hundred of them, surely?" the officer murmured. "And if they should send a *fleet*..."

"No, drakkar aren't quite that large. But even forty or fifty of the bastards would be enough to raze your average canton to the ground. I've given my condolences personally at a number of them."

That was why the man once known as Goldilocks Erich and now known as the Gallows-Mast or Erik of the Songless Sword had earned a reputation for righteous vengeance. Each of his battles was a small payback for the pain the innocent public had been made to bear.

"His vengeance isn't his alone, though," the admiral went on. "Each and every soul who serves under him has lost someone thanks to a Nifling raid. They've brought along every ounce of fury and resentment for these sea-demons that they could carry."

This fleet of three warships—quite the large force for an adventuring group—and two supply ships (which were absent today) numbered three hundred souls. Every last one was owed a debt that could only be paid in blood, blood, blood. They came from every corner of northern Rhine, and the isles, and the far polar countries. They came from all manner of kith and culture. They even counted a few rogue Nifling folk among them, whose grudges against their own ran deeper than their love of the game.

Without rest, they gathered up the wicked men of the sea and ferried them straight to the execution stand. They stole their quarry's ships and burned them to appease the souls of the Niflings' victims. They sold their counterplunder and spent their earnings erecting memorials for the lost. They were called Fury's Brood, and the people of the north respected them more than any knight or

noble.

“They’ve been at it for fifteen years. It’s a fool’s errand to ask if they’re ‘in their right minds.’”

“They’re incredible...”

“They have to be. They couldn’t survive elsewhere. They’ve driven down our losses severely. The barbarians moan about the sea feeling ‘smaller’ these days, but that’s to be expected.”

“You’re rather informed, admiral. Are you close with old Gallows-Mast?”

The siren snapped his beak. In mensch terms, he was clucking his tongue.

It was an odd question. They had spent fifteen years working from the same base in Schleswig, so of course they knew one another. The admiral had even taken on some of Erich’s former crew, when they’d put their turn at the wheel of vengeance behind them.

When they met in the canteen, they would share a drink. On missions like today, the admiral would happily play decoy to rid the seas of a few more bloodthirsty pirates. It was a ridiculous prospect, really. Although the papers designated this as an “escort mission,” in truth the ships of the High Seas Fleet were nothing but bait to ensnare yet another group of pirates.

Despite being in his thirties, the gold-haired adventurer still had a young man’s mien. He’d held a cigarette in his smirking lips as he proposed the day’s mission, telling the admiral that his job had become all the more difficult, as nowadays it was more likely than not that the Niflings would run rather than fight upon seeing his flag.

In official documents, the success of this mission would be chalked up to the admiral’s own abilities. All Gallows-Mast would receive would be the spoils, the bounties, and a more fearsome reputation.

You couldn’t do this job without a lick of madness, but Erich was truly on a whole other level. If the admiral said that he was “friendly” with such a freak of nature, then his subordinates would probably start to keep their distance, thinking that the admiral was equally mad.

Over the years, the adventurer hadn't just received some splatter—no, he had been immersed in blood. The gods of Nifleyja had laid every curse They knew upon the man. It was said that he couldn't even sleep unless he rested his head upon the lap of a maiden.

All the same, he'd drawn in a whole league of followers, and they'd followed him across the open seas for almost every waking moment. Another curse the gods had struck him with was that armor would never keep him fully safe, but he hadn't let it faze him. He entered each and every battle with his golden hair flowing free.

The admiral's conversations with Erich when they shared a drink were at odds with the young man's appearance in battle. He seemed so affable, so genteel; the admiral felt a lurching sickness in his stomach when he saw his blood-addled madness on the battlefield. He had decided that it would be best for his own mental state to avoid prying too deep into that man's heart.

"He's an adventurer with whom I work on jobs such as these. That's all," he eventually said.

"I see."

"Look. They're making contact."

Being a bird of prey siren meant that the admiral's eyesight almost went without compare. The ships were almost dots in the distance, but he could make out every detail. They were about to clash.

"You've received thalassurge training, right? Use a telescopic spell and look at him up there on the prow, boldly taking on the sea breeze."

"I'm still just an amateur... I have so little mana that my master told me to give up on trying to become a magus... I'm a dropout, really."

Despite his protestations, the new officer used his short staff to cast Farsight. The range of his spell only allowed him to barely see past the horizon, but he could easily make out the flag bearing the sign of the Fury.

As the admiral had said—the officer couldn't believe the admiral could see *this* far without some kind of magic—upon the Fury's Favor, the ship leading the fleet, was a wiry swordsman with his right foot upon its wolf-shaped prow.

He was dressed in Imperial tempered leather armor—rare to see here, as it made it almost impossible to swim. Despite the barrage of arrows coming his way, he seemed completely unbothered. There he was, standing without a helmet, his golden hair licked by the breeze, utterly at ease.

The officer wondered if this man truly was in his thirties. Erich wore a fanged smile, excited for the upcoming battle, and the officer would have pegged him as being barely in his twenties. He hardly seemed suited to all his blood-soaked epithets—the man didn't have so much as a single scar. He couldn't believe that a fellow with such feminine features and a waist-length golden fishtail braid could truly be as fearsome as they said.

In a moment, Erich's blue eyes flashed with the fire of battle. Even through Farsight, the rookie officer felt a wave of terror at the sight.

Erich wasn't normal. He functioned under a code of sorts, but it lay far beyond the comprehension of any normal man. To see as he saw for but a moment might unravel one's mind...

The officer leaped back in surprise. All of a sudden the swordsman turned his face up to the heavens—and the officer was sure that Erich had just locked eyes with him! It wasn't a trick of the light. As Erich batted away the next volley of arrows with his sword, the officer could make out the unmistakable movement of his lips—they said, "Hey."

The officer didn't want to believe it, but it didn't stop there. From his birds'-eye view, he saw Erich waving his free hand at him! Although he was far from a magus, the officer was no complete novice at magic. He'd amended his spell with formulae for disguise and anonymity; anyone would have struggled to peer back through it. But there Erich was, smiling right back at him, as if he was telling him to watch the fight that was about to unfold closely. The officer squirmed, uncertain of what to do.

"It might be better for you to just pretend that he's a creature from the time of myths and legends," the admiral said.

"Wha...? You mean the Age of Gods?"

"That man isn't emulating the adventurers of that bygone age—he's become one. Don't overthink it."

The admiral's keen eyesight had not failed to pick up on the little unspoken interaction. After confirming that they had made contact, he descended from the rear bridge. He didn't need to see what was about to happen. It would take around thirty minutes for Erich's group to finish off a group of that size. If they lasted longer than that, he would personally congratulate the pirates.

"That monster is making moves to eliminate the North Sea King by next summer. Engage him on his level and you'll end up infected with his folly."

"Th-The North Sea King?! He means to challenge a true dragon?!"

The officer had followed the admiral down, but found himself stopping in his tracks. The North Sea King made its home in the most fearsome waters of the north. There were few true dragons left in all creation, and this one had come by its longevity honestly. It was the master of all the drakes that lived in the sea, a gargantuan monster that disturbed the very currents in its wake. After the Niflings, it was one of the biggest reasons why Imperial ships could not reach the ocean sailing west from Schleswig.

Most with the means to consider such things feared the beast so much that they would sooner *build* a passage to the west than try to slay it. The thought had been convincing enough to warrant a speculative budget, but such a project would have eaten thirty to fifty years' worth of the Imperial domestic product. At any rate, it was a fool's errand to even think about taking down such a fearsome creature.

"Yes, he's completely serious. He's received permission from the local nobles and such, so it's going ahead. It won't be long before the common folk learn all about it."

"E-Excuse me? A request for *permission*, not aid?"

"Indeed. After all, the seas are bound to get more violent than they already are. A responsible fellow makes sure anyone who could get caught in their wake knows what's coming."

The rookie officer's brain was almost fried by all the unbelievable facts he had taken in. The admiral turned. "Are you coming, then?" he called out to the poor befuddled young man.

The officer shook his head. “I want to see the future legend’s battle. Do I have your permission to remain on the bridge?”

“It’s going to be a dull one.”

“I understand, but I still wish to watch.”

The admiral sighed. “Every year we lose another to that damn fool’s madness... Fine, you’re off duty for now. Do as you please.”

“Thank you so much, admiral!”

“I’ll be in my bunk. Don’t wake me until the signal light.”

They were far enough out that they weren’t at any risk of collateral damage, and so the admiral departed for his cabin, leaving behind the lad who wished to gaze upon the great monstrous contradiction of the North.

[Tips] The Imperial High Seas Fleet of Rhine earned its somewhat ostentatious title for the fact that the northern sea was connected to the ocean, despite countless difficulties barring them from open water. Various experiments, such as using ships imported from the Southern Sea and recruiting diverse races that were suited to life on the seas, led to their current state. They work hard, but many view their position as a demotion and act in keeping with it.

The fleet has over thirty warships, but such a grand number is hardly fit to protect the people of the Empire’s northernmost region. There are rumors that the new aeroships will be dispatched in their stead.

“Even if you survive, you won’t find paradise waiting for you.”

I wasn’t sure how many decades it had been since I last heard that quote—where was it from? I had vague memories of it once being an anime, but I wasn’t sure anymore—but something in my hazy memories told me that the TRPG, regardless of how compelling the hook and the setting were, would grind your average tabletop newbie into hamburger.

“A report!”

Wherever the quote came from, it was the truth. I was at fault. I'd felt the coils tightening around me at my last port of call; I hadn't been able to see a way to untangle the convolutions of the plot I'd found myself in and still come out in one piece, but I *had* found a way out of the game entirely—just to throw myself back in to another one. Yes, I survived, but why did I expect anything even close to paradise? Of course the same problems would just crop up again in a different place—how could I have forgotten that?

Same shit, different day. People were the same everywhere you went—it was simply a matter of scale. I was a fool to think that moving from Ende Erde to the frosty reaches of the north would unstick me from this quagmire and return me to the days when I found some *joy* in this line of work.

"Situation?"

"Enemy vessels just under ten miles out. Eight of them! I believe they caught sight of the merchant ships!"

It was just my luck: my new base of operations was even bloodier than the last, and here I was, hauling pirates back to shore day in and day out. The God of Cycles and the God of Ordeals were cruel.

"Is that so? Very well, alert all ships. Same plan as always," I said.

"Yessir!"

The seabird siren kicked off from the mast and flew off from the black ship.

"All righty, mates. You lot feeling that itch in your fingers, the fire in your bellies? Do you feel the Fury stirrin'? These raider punks are on a bit of a *losin'* streak. They must be pretty damn hungry," I said, my voice reaching everyone thanks to Voice Transfer. I heard cheers and laughter erupt from the cabins near me.

What in the world had turned me into a Viking hunter out here in the frostbitten rump of the Empire?

No—I needed to accept, even after all this time, that it was all my fault. To tell the truth, I had gotten sick of all the political scheming back in Marsheim, sucking me down, dragging me further and further from my ideal picture of an adventurer's life. I was the one who'd made the decision to bail for good and

start afresh with Margit.

Even more than a decade out, I was still certain that I'd had no other choice. The sticky, murky plot in Marsheim had grown to encompass the entire region. I was terrified that if I had put my foot back into that mess I would never be able to leave again. I'd had to nip the whole thing in the bud.

Could you blame me? I had finally managed to start a career as an adventurer! My dream one day was to save the entire world. I couldn't be getting bogged down with a campaign that was stuck in one region for the rest of my life. If I didn't do anything, then I would have been trapped forever. It lit a fire under my ass.

In the end, my old routine was simple, clear-cut, *boring:* wake up, hit the streets, cut down crooked folk like wheat, sleep with one eye open, do it all again tomorrow. The government signed off on everything—I kept the local lords feeling secure enough to keep their seditious rumblings to a minimum, after all. I thought I had played my part pretty well, but everyone burns out eventually, living like that.

For me, the tipping point had been realizing I'd put in all that work for naught. What was there to be proud of anymore?

I'd kept the local lords of Marsheim *quiet,* but not *silent.* In the end I could only delay their revolts momentarily, and when the Big One finally hit it took direct Imperial intervention to put it down. Apparently even now embers of sedition still burned in their small and shadowed corners of the region. Updates came every now and then from my old comrade. He always spared at least one line to gripe about how dire things had gotten.

In the end, Siegfried and Kaya had decided to stay in Ende Erde. I had told them about my plan to just shake myself free of it all, but it was their homeland. They'd told me that if there was a time to make a name for themselves, then this was it.

A party held together to serve a common goal. If that goal changed for some and not for others, it was only natural for their paths to diverge. I understood their resolve and they did mine—neither of us tried to force the matter.

It wasn't just Siegfried's letters that told me they were doing well—songs of

their feats had reached these parts, and I was always happy to hear them. They'd become the subjects of all sorts of tales; romance stories involving Sieg and Kaya—the Catchpenny Scribbler must finally have got his claws into her for an interview—and lively action-comedies tended to curry the most favor. They weren't quite the standard heroic fare that Siegfried wanted. I bet he was a bit bummed out by that.

My old comrade dreamed of being the kind of unflappable hero that everyone could look up to, but it was evident even from afar that his kind personality was too strong. People had latched on to his good character instead of his heroic deeds, which meant that his stories sometimes ended without a real resolution, with more focus put on the laughs than the glory. I felt for him. He was likable and a good guy, but maybe a little too easy to typecast as a lovable fool.

"Enough about Siegfried, what about you?" That's probably what you're wondering, right, dear reader? As you might have guessed, I'm in no position to be judgmental about my friend.

"Come on, give us another cheer," I announced to everyone. "A Fury always smiles when dinner's on the table!"

My subordinates all let out spirited cries.

I'd be lying if I said "I dunno, it just sorta happened." Despite what certain cult classics of film and literature might tell you, you don't become a dread privateer by *accident*. Every facet of this new life—the perpetual lurch and churn of life on the northern sea, the company I kept with the broken and the bloodthirsty, the bevy of curses laid on me by the store-brand Aesir from their comfortable seats in "Valhalla with the serial numbers filed off"—was a direct consequence of my own choices.

I didn't have the time to enjoy my first trip to the seaside in this go at life. Instead, when we got to a fishing canton, we found it utterly ravaged by a recent pirate attack. The scene was so terrible that before we could hear the roar of the sea, we were greeted by the groans and cries of the ruined.

It really was an awful sight. The pirates had cut down anything that moved and stolen anything not nailed down, then razed the rest to the ground and gone home. A few stragglers had managed to hide for long enough to survive

the attack. We found them with a sole pirate who had been left behind.

I supposed that the fool had been chasing after a little bit of “fun” and had taken a blade to the gut and his nethers for his trouble. He was bleeding out on the ground—most likely left behind as dead weight. That was his own folly. What ticked me off *personally* was that the moment the fool had laid eyes on the blade at my waist, he’d started begging me to fight him so he could die on his feet, with a sword in his hand. He’d said he wouldn’t be able to reach his paradise otherwise.

Well, I was young and rash back then and lost it, to put it bluntly. Granted, I doubt many would call me the calmest adventurer on the sea even now, but I don’t regret just leaving him to bleed out in the dirt.

I didn’t have any qualms with their creed that they lived as they pleased and would die as they pleased. Hell, my life wasn’t all that different. My world’s GM couldn’t give a damn about sensible encounter design or campaign planning, so I wasn’t going to make fun of a man’s life choices.

What I couldn’t abide by was causing harm to folks who lived on the straight and narrow. All’s fair in love and war; survive first and weigh your soul later; all that rot applied, but you needed to have some honor and humanity at the end of it all. In my eyes, nothing forgave the slaughter of innocents just to fill your own belly, no matter how daunting the prospect of cultivating your land is.

A poor man had handed out a ring for us to take. It’d belonged to his dead wife. He begged us to avenge her. We’d only just arrived in the north, but already the work was piling up.

It snowballed from there. The Empire and the local Adventurer’s Association wanted to bring an end to the raids—it seemed like a governmental task, but it was technically no different from dealing with bandits, so it didn’t impinge on the ancient oath barring adventurers from working for the government—and we ended up taking on a ton of retaliatory strike gigs. As we crushed pirate crew after pirate crew, we found ourselves in our current situation.

It was a cruel trick of fate. I had been so sick of being caught up in ties of obligation that I ran away, and here I was, caught up in them once more. I had chosen to live life by my own rules, so the world had decided to play the same

game.

If you were to ask me if I was actually going on adventures, I wouldn't be sure how to respond. Felling pirate strongholds, crushing groups of raiders, dredging up lost treasures from the sunken ships of famous Niflings of yore—they all seemed adventurer-y on paper, but if I had to be honest, this wasn't quite what I had envisioned.

The root of the problem was that it felt entirely *unheroic*. The job was more hack and slash than my time back in Ende Erde. How could there be no singular revolt here despite an *endless* slog of bloody battles that wouldn't even get a feature on the most late-night TV slot?

"Boss, we've dispatched the amphibious vanguard."

"Good. Tell them to undo our mooring," I said.

"Yessir."

The one thing I couldn't refute was that the job needed doing, so I had no one to complain to. As long as these pirates continued to lay waste to their neighbors and leave a trail of bloodshed behind, we needed to put them in their place. Although I had never been here before, I still had some ties to this place, albeit not direct ones. This was the homeland of my irreplaceable old chum—who had finally become a professor three years ago, tied for the youngest to ever earn their terminal degree, and the first tivisco to do so in the College's history—so I wanted to do my part in bringing peace to the area, in my own way. They'd joined the College in the first place because they understood that the root of their homeland's problems was infrastructural; the struggle would never end until trade could flow freely and safely through the region and a sustainable way of life could be wrung from the earth despite the long, brutal winter. I felt some obligation not to run away this time.

"As soon as we're untethered we'll be moving out, full speed," I added.

"Yessir!"

I stood upon the prow of the ship. The enemy fleet's scouts had been eliminated by our depth charge. Now we were plunging head-on into their befuddled ranks.

One, two... Oho, they had two big ol' drakkar and six lesser longships. According to my siren subordinate, who had flown up and eyeballed their fleet, there were four supply ships too. This would be a more *substantial* fray than usual.

And it seems like I've got a little audience today. I may be getting on a little, but maybe I'll give the youngster a show.

I felt the faint tickle of the mana from someone's scrying spell, so I gave them a little wave before focusing on the job in front of me.

There were still three or so miles between us and the enemy; distance enough for me to bother with tessering over. Ever since I drew the ire of the great god and battle gods of the peninsula and had been "cursed" by them, it had the unexpected side effect of making my little parlor tricks far easier to use.

I warped over the enemy's barrier and set about to clean up shop alone.

There were no fireworks or fanfare. I just blinked, and when I opened my eyes again I was there on the enemy side. If I were to reference one of those games back at the table, it would be like if someone dropped a tank on your front line while you were still checking your resources.

My subordinates had dealt with the scouts, but I was their leader—it was my job to make sure they suffered as few losses as possible. We had somehow earned the overblown title of Fury's Brood; I was obliged to live up to it.

"Whuh?!"

"Where'd he come from?!"

Only my closest and dearest knew I could do this. Every other witness was dead—by my own hand or the gallows.

"Gyagh!"

"My hand! MY HAND!"

"Argh, I can't see a thing..."

With Seafaring Warrior, I could fight on board any ship without worrying about getting tripped up by my own inexpert sea legs, and I tore through my foes. I singled out those spots that would disable and disarm: their eyes, their

hands. It didn't take long for the deck to spill over with blood. I'd make for a piss-poor privateer if I struggled with this sort of thing, y'know?

All the same, these guys weren't pushovers. They had some sub-hero-class fighters, could launch miracles at me with a speed unseen in the Empire, and their general stats were damn high. There were always a couple of real monsters in the mix with a Nifling crew, and that meant I'd had to reach a monstrous level myself.

"Just...die!"

"Aha!" I responded.

I had cut too shallow into one of my eyeless foes. He leaped at me in a desperate lunge. An offhand spell of mine took me clear of the blow. *Not bad.* He must have realized what was coming and tilted his head just in time to save one eye. That took some guts, but you couldn't be a pirate without them.

"Huh?! I went...through him?!"

By using my space-bending magic at the right time on a fixed location, I could displace my own image. The gods Themselves had cursed me, and in so doing bound my being ever more tightly to this plane. That meant that although my body phased out of existence thanks to my magic, I appeared to be precisely where I was before. It was an invincible dodge.

To tell the truth, I was pretty fond of it. It didn't come with many drawbacks and the mana cost was a pittance, meaning that I could use it as many times as I liked in one turn. Yes, my curses were still a burden, but I could see through to their inner workings and bend their mechanics to my own ends. For my trouble, I'd been gifted the sort of overpowered technique you usually only saw in the hands of endgame death machines custom-made to suit the GM's devilish whims.

"Well, points for effort," I said.

"Gwah!"

I kicked the dazed pirate and knocked him into the rough waters of the northern sea. These pirates favored light armor—almost too light, to an Imperial soldier's eyes—but even they couldn't swim with scabbard and shield

weighing them down. I could see bubbles as he tried to pull himself to the surface, but soon they disappeared.

Drowning wasn't considered a "valiant death in battle," so unfortunately the valkyries wouldn't be seeing him off today. *Sorry, fella.* But it still beat death by hanging.

"Kill me! Please! Just kill me!"

"You'll die. Just not today."

I cleaned the blood off my sword, got my bearings with Farsight, and proceeded with the job. It was almost dull.

The Niflings' little peanut-butter-and-chocolate, divine-and-arcane rainbow bridge trick meant that they often moved their ships into a single-line formation to create a makeshift landing dock and give their bridges the most possible surface area to connect.

Due to my handiwork, the head ship in the formation had stopped moving. Their ships broke formation as they tried to avoid a collision. My subordinates were capitalizing on the chaos to begin their counterattack.

From afar, I could see a ship explode. Our flagship had launched a torpedo at it, blowing a massive hole in its hull.

These weren't the refined things used in the Second World War. Like our depth charges, they were simple ceramic pieces, waterproofed and filled with magically powered gas in the end to send them rocketing forward. They would speed off as soon as they were launched—hardly better than toys, compared to the sort of life-ending power you saw from my old world's equivalents. It was the explosive spell formula worked into their business ends that elevated mine to the level of truly deadly weapons.

These makeshift torpedoes could only just reach a target a hundred meters away, and they were a *nightmare* to aim.

But these were *Niflings* we were talking about. They scorned arrows and projectile magic as the tools of cowards and so they would always draw into the appropriate range for close-quarters combat. That made our torpedoes all the more effective.

As long as you didn't get caught up in the void left behind by the explosions, they were hugely effective. In fact, their modest yield meant that we could blow holes in their hulls and sink our foes on time and under budget.

It was a bit of a problem that we couldn't capture sunk foes alive, nor could we loot their ships, but on paper we weren't truly associated with the government, so it didn't matter too much in the end. We were funded by everyone who wished to see peace and trade flourish in these waters, so unlike our foes, who had to fund their raids with the same loot they needed to carry home in one piece, we had less to worry about.

Not only that, we didn't have to hold back for fear that we would be catching civilians in the cross fire.

"You've got to live and die by your own rules." These mercenary's words —*hold on, how do I know that a mercenary said them?*—came out of a realization that your life would impinge on others'. Because of that, your death would only have value if you found some logic in it.

We were on two very different sides. The logic of an Imperial would never make sense to a bunch of barbarians who did as they pleased. There might have been some good people or some valiant warriors among their number, but the opportunity cost was too high to seek them out.

"Oh, our aim's good today."

Two more torpedoes hit their marks—three ships started to sink. Adding together my one ship, we had already routed half of their fleet. Their morale and cohesion must have taken a big hit.

If it had been the Imperial army we were up against, it would have been over for them. The commanding officer responsible for them taking such damage so early in the game wouldn't get off with a simple demotion.

But they weren't Imperials—they were pirates with a completely different value system. They came for me despite the chaos unfurling around them, their alien terror at the prospect of a dishonorable death driving them forward.

Right, a bit more fun's to be had, then.

We were planning to use these enemy ships as bait in our hunting of the

North Sea King next summer, so it was a bit annoying that we'd ruined a fair few of them. I wanted to have at least *one* of their drakkar, preferably both. I decided to take the opportunity to secure one and conjured a light over my next target.

Believing my reliable subordinates would follow me, I activated a short-distance space-bending spell and dropped myself down onto what looked to be the mother ship.

Shouts that made me want to put my hands over my ears erupted as the pirates saw the man who just destroyed a boatload of their fellows appeared on deck out of thin air.

Among them was a callistian roaring that he wished to face me in battle. From the mystic aura of his axe and the flashy nature of his cloak and helmet, I assumed he was their captain.

"Erik of the Songless Sword! In the name of our battle god, the eldest son of our great god, and of my father—I challenge you in single combat!"

Today was my lucky day. If I defeated their leader, cleanup would be so much easier. *Things are going my way.*

"I am Otso, son of Perkunas! I pledge my honor as a warrior to—"

"Oh, yeah, yeah, sure, I agree. I'm Erich, son of Johannes. Now, let's hurry up and get started—I'm quite the busy man."

This was quite the rude response, even for me—I could see Otso's fur standing on end—but it was obvious how this whole thing went. My answer would always be the same; I knew the whole ritual by rote.

"Insolent wretch! How dare you sully a sacred duel!"

"All right, let's do this already. Words are meaningless at this point."

This was a one-on-one duel under the name of their great god. I was sure their pantheon had already invoked the Demand Duel miracle. If accepted, the miracle would prevent anyone from interfering and we would be forced into a pure duel, stripped of any buffs and debuffs. It was pretty metal—utterly *mad,* sure, but undeniably raw as hell. If the duel was rejected, then Demand Duel

would afflict the coward with a debuff via a curse or the like. You had to go through the motions whatever the case, really.

The miracle was a way of halting your enemy's forces momentarily, so I could tell that Otso meant to slow us down.

That wasn't all either. A side effect meant that the loser had to answer to *any* demand made by the victor. It was a stupid bonus that flew in the face of conventional cause and effect, but I guess that was just how it went with miracles sometimes.

At any rate, I just needed to do my job. The tides had already turned. Even if I died here today, I'd done irreparable harm to their raiding infrastructure. They were stuck on a downward spiral.

This was just like what had happened with a certain ogre in the past. This lot had simply made too many enemies. The grudges against them covered the wide northern region and had fueled a growing faith in the Furies. It had taken only a single spark to bring a divine conflagration to the region.

They had created a land where many high-level priests had received divine messages from the Furies to enact vengeance against these pirates. I had merely been the kindling for the flame; my role was half complete. It didn't really matter who took up the mantle next.

You are standing in a pool of oil created by your ancestors. All that remains is for the match to be struck and for you to burn out of existence. I'll make sure to sweep away the cinders.

It was kind of an ironic situation. I had tried to become a singular hero, and for my efforts I'd created a situation where *anyone* could take my place as the figurehead of my operation. I could hand down my name to any fool rotting in my brig and retire to an island paradise to get old and fat, and Gallows-Mast Erich would still be out there, striking fear and awe in the hearts of men. My old comrade would bust a gut if he were here right now.

"Don't fear," I said. "It's simply that your time has come."

"GRAAAAH!"

Maybe it was my fault that these pirates had gathered under Otso. They'd

needed a new leader to rally around after my rampage had cost them one of their high kings.

If I were still fifteen or sixteen, this fearsome warrior would have squashed me to a pulp. His axe swung in all directions like a tornado. Each time it hit the deck, he skillfully used the rebound to keep up the assault. Callistoi were not only blessed with some of the biggest bodies among humanfolk, and Otso in particular had honed his skills with his weapon, but he wasn't quite *monstrous* enough. If I had to put him in Agrippinoid terms, he might not have been tickling at her ankles, but maybe he could just about grasp at her breast.

At any rate, he had played a bad move to take on someone who was going to be hunting a true dragon next summer.

I put some focus into my sword arm as I struck.

"Whuh?!"

My mighty swing cleft the axe-head from its vermilion handle, ruining it for good. It might have been imbued with his ancestors' hopes and dreams, blessed by the gods, or forged with a primordial word of power at its heart, but it couldn't compare to the starving might of my Craving Blade.

Otso's axe had the power to draw weapons to it. It was a mighty weapon that could lure a cocky foe right to him and crush them before they even had time to cry uncle. However, not even the wildest of dogs could face up to a blade that had glutted itself on the blood of countless pirates and still moaned for more.

"What's wrong? Did you think you were the only one borrowing the might of the divine?"

In my hand was my mystic blade, able to withstand a reality-crushing blow. It was good to trust your weapon, but you were obliged to look at your opponent's weapon before lashing out too.

Well, that might be a bit unfair of me to say. A few seconds before the counterattack I used my magic to return Schutzwolfe to its scabbard and call forth my aching, desperate death dealer. I shouldn't fault his immaturity for not seeing that.

My technique of securing the kill before my enemy knew what hit them was

still unchanged.

I delivered a return cut, slicing through his right forearm—gauntlets were another “coward’s way out” in Nifling culture.

“Ngh...”

That wasn’t all. I summoned three blades and sent them, along with Schutzwolfe, through him, piercing his shoulders and knees. It was over.

“Raaaaah!”

Held in place in the air, the callistian roared, and the barrier enclosing our duel vanished. The gods of the north favored their own, but even They must have realized that this was his loss.

“You bastard! Kill me! How dare you do this to me?! Where is your pride as a warrior?!” Otso bellowed.

“My pride? Hah, funny joke.”

With the duel over, I sent my fleet of flying swords to cut down the dumbfounded onlookers. It was just as I had done earlier; my aim was to simply render them helpless.

In hindsight, maybe I’d overfed the Craving Blade. It had been howling in my ear due to the presence of an opponent worth cutting down, but now it was silent. In the past when I used another sword, it would screech at me that it would be happy to cut down *anything*, but now despite the presence of more foes to defeat, it was eerily quiet. The difference was so extreme that I wondered if it would start to be picky of its prey. It was like a cat who’d had its first taste of gourmet food. If it started to act up and refuse to come out unless it deemed the fight worthy of its time, I’d have cause for concern.

I returned the sword to its realm and retrieved Schutzwolfe from Otso’s right knee.

Ugh, could these pirates keep it down? Their war cries were loud, and their “sore loser” screams are even louder...

“Pride means nothing to someone whose blade swings in the name of the Fury,” I said. “Northern sea warrior? Hero of the choppy seas? Lord of the

waves? Don't make me laugh. You're just bandits with swimming lessons."

While I was getting in my messerspiel with Otso, my subordinates were getting through their own jobs.

The pirates strung up on the mast of the other drakkar were probably Margit's handiwork. She had worked on techniques using her web, and had devised a way of efficiently nullifying groups of enemies. Seeing her continue to grow was a reminder for me to never grow lax.

I had to stop playing around and finish with cleanup. Two ships were making moves to flee. I wasn't about to let them. I was going to devour them, along with the other supply ships.

"Ngh... R-Remember this, Erik!" Otso retorted. "You've stolen honorable deaths from all of us! Our souls will return to the sea and be reborn to haunt you again! We'll come back...again and again to strike you down!"

"You *what*?"

This guy just couldn't take a loss. Although Nifleyja myths *did* say that would happen. *Fine, be my guest.*

"Then come at me again. Callistoi grow quickly, no? It'll take a decade for you to be ready for battle once again. I'll be in my forties by then, but sure."

"Wha...?"

"Try as many times as it'll take. I'll kill you every time. As long as pirates like you continue to rise up and ravage these seas, I'll put you down until not a single soul wishes for murder anymore. Maybe I'll be fifty or sixty; it doesn't matter. As long as you desire to raid, plunder, and pillage, then I'll appear before you and grant you a dishonorable death."

I had run away once already. Not due to cowardice, it was due to... No, who was I fooling? Whatever the case, I had decided the situation in Marsheim was too hairy for me and had chosen to escape. I wouldn't make the same compromise again—wherever I may end up, whatever may happen.

"I live by my own selfishness. I am prepared to die by untoward means. Although I seek vengeance, I understand that others will seek vengeance

against me. I will always be ready.”

Now wait patiently until they come to tie you up, I thought.

I decided that the place for my soul would be amid a sea of adventure and murder. As long as I kept to these values, death *would* come for me one day.

My own culture didn’t care if I was killed in my sleep. If no one would take my life while my head was resting upon my pillow, then I would continue to fight on.

[Tips] The Furies are three sister gods in the Rhinian pantheon who seek revenge through death. Tisiphone was said to have been born from the mixing blood of two gods—one good and one bad—who slew one another in the same moment. There were other, similar gods who reigned over similar domains, but none have dared worship Tisiphone due to Her inauspicious nature. However, the people of the northern Empire had no choice but to beg for Her help, thanks to the northern raiders’ endless assault.

“Look at you, right back at it before we’ve even sighted land...” Margit said.

On her swaying hammock in the ship’s hold, I planted my face into Margit’s lap. A faint warmth started to seep into me. Her sweet voice and tender touch as she stroked my hair was filled with the same care and love as it always had.

The only difference could be found in the light of her eyes as she smiled. It wasn’t hugely different, but where they used to watch me, now it felt as if she were standing guard over me. Did I see anything reproachful in her eyes? Maybe that would have been reading too much into it...

All the same, Margit's heart remained ever kind and unblemished in her love toward me. As she gave her lap for me to rest my head upon, I wondered if she would be able to fulfill the promise we made the day we left Konigstuhl—to kill me if I swayed in my desire to become the adventurer I dreamed of.

"I'm...a little tired," I said.

"Of course you would be. A dozen ships in a single day is enough to tire anyone out," she replied.

This was no good. My heart was flailing. A part of me had viewed Margit chasing me down in that despondent possible future as a desperate chase, but now a part of me started to see it as a kind of release, or near enough.

I couldn't stand up proud in front of my subordinates or those who supported me like this, even though I was the one who started it all.

I was probably being punished for trying to simultaneously make preparations for our hunt for the North Sea King. Financial-and manpower-related preparations aside, we had to lay the groundwork, collect information, head to seaside cantons to tell them to watch the waves. The overwork had squeezed everything out of me, and it looked like tepid complaints had been in there too.

It was true that what I'd done was nothing short of backbreaking work, but I felt a rush of shame at how uncool I was being.

"I wonder when peace will return to the northern sea," Margit said.

"We've been working for fifteen years, and still it goes on. I think we've got a long way to go."

Elisa was currently dealing with her professorial examinations, but still excitedly told me, "Soon enough I'll be able to come and aid you, Dear Brother!" Then there was Mika, who was going to join us next summer for the dragon hunt. I was pathetic right now—I couldn't act like this in front of them. Then of course there was Celia, who was negotiating with the church to build a cenotaph in a place above the snow or a church of the Fury for our sake.

It didn't matter that the task before me was huge. I might have wavered once, but I couldn't remain so fragile of heart. Even if this wasn't my ideal, I was still

on track to become a great adventurer—one the world would remember forever, if I played my cards right.

Lady Agrippina's work with the aeroships looked to be going smoothly enough to lend some aid in the not-too-distant future. It would make the hunt next year less overwhelming, but sadly it wouldn't do much to lighten the rest of my load.

I was working on behalf of the people of the northern Empire, and I had chosen to raise the flag of a Fury—in the holy texts, She was depicted as a cold and vicious but beautiful woman—so I couldn't half-ass this.

Our battles to come with the North Sea King risked causing tsunamis that would threaten not just the Schleswig Peninsula, but the *whole northern inlet*. The damage would be incalculable. Things had just begun to settle down for the people here, and trade was just beginning to flourish—I couldn't bear to ruin everything again.

Mika's *headquarters* were on that inlet. They were leading a team that was trying to rework the shallow seas so that ships with deeper hulls could sail westward. The islands and rocky reefs made it difficult to navigate and disrupted the currents, requiring even the smallest of crafts to have a guide from a sea-dwelling race leading the way. Mika was working on reforming the most dangerous points—I remained ever amazed at their skills—and daunting as it was, it would still be less costly in time and resources than the crazy idea of building a new canal that went *through* the Schleswig Peninsula.

My old chum had come back to their home with dreams of making it prosperous and safe. I didn't want to do anything to ruin that for them. Defeating the North Sea King would mean reducing the number of lesser drakes that it spawned, further preserving the safety of these waters. It was a mission we couldn't mess up.

The Rhinian government had first decided to build the aeroships because they wanted to liberate themselves from relying on canals and ports for trade, but after creating a whole fleet of mass-produced ships, they had come up against the stumbling block that the transport costs would far outweigh any profit. This massive oversight had meant that they were suddenly impatient to bring peace to the northern sea.

I could only nod my head. Despite my previous world's jumbo jets, trains and ships still were far more efficient when it came to energy consumption. It would make no sense to waste all your budget sending your goods via aeroships just because it seemed cooler to only offer goods whose prices were too high to tempt any but the wealthiest merchants.

Lady Agrippina's work never ended—after working on the aeroships, she had tried to step away from any and all public office work, but apparently that hadn't panned out—and now she was also chief designer of sea transport ships that utilized arcane furnaces for propulsion. At any rate, she had revisited her work on aeroships and refined her blueprints to make them more efficient for diplomatic and wartime use, meaning that we now had backup that could scout ahead and provide us with support.

With the knowledge that they couldn't be used for transport, the Empire were toying with opportunities to show off its mass-produced Theresea-class conquestships in a more martial display.

Incredibly, these could be mass-manufactured a whole ten years before they were scheduled to. Lady Agrippina had griped that they could have been used to clean up Ende Erde if things had fallen into place earlier, but now the first five ships were all outfitted with deadly, war-ready arcane cannons. They had become floating nightmares that could rain down terror at maximal efficiency.

I was hoping the people of Nifleyja would see this and decide to not raid anymore for at least half a century.

But who knew what the future held? I didn't particularly want to see the rise of top secret government corsairs flying about... Even on Earth the prospect of long-lasting peace was always mercurial. There would always be bad actors—nations that lied, schemed and manipulated; another would-be empire with some new superweapon loomed around every corner.

"I feel like we're on an endless cleanup mission," I said.

"There are moments where we get jobs befitting an adventurer. A complaint won't even shatter a single dragon scale, will it?"

"Yeah, you're right... Wishing for too much can be suicidal."

I pulled myself closer to Margit. The roaring of the waves outside mingled with her pulse and her breath.

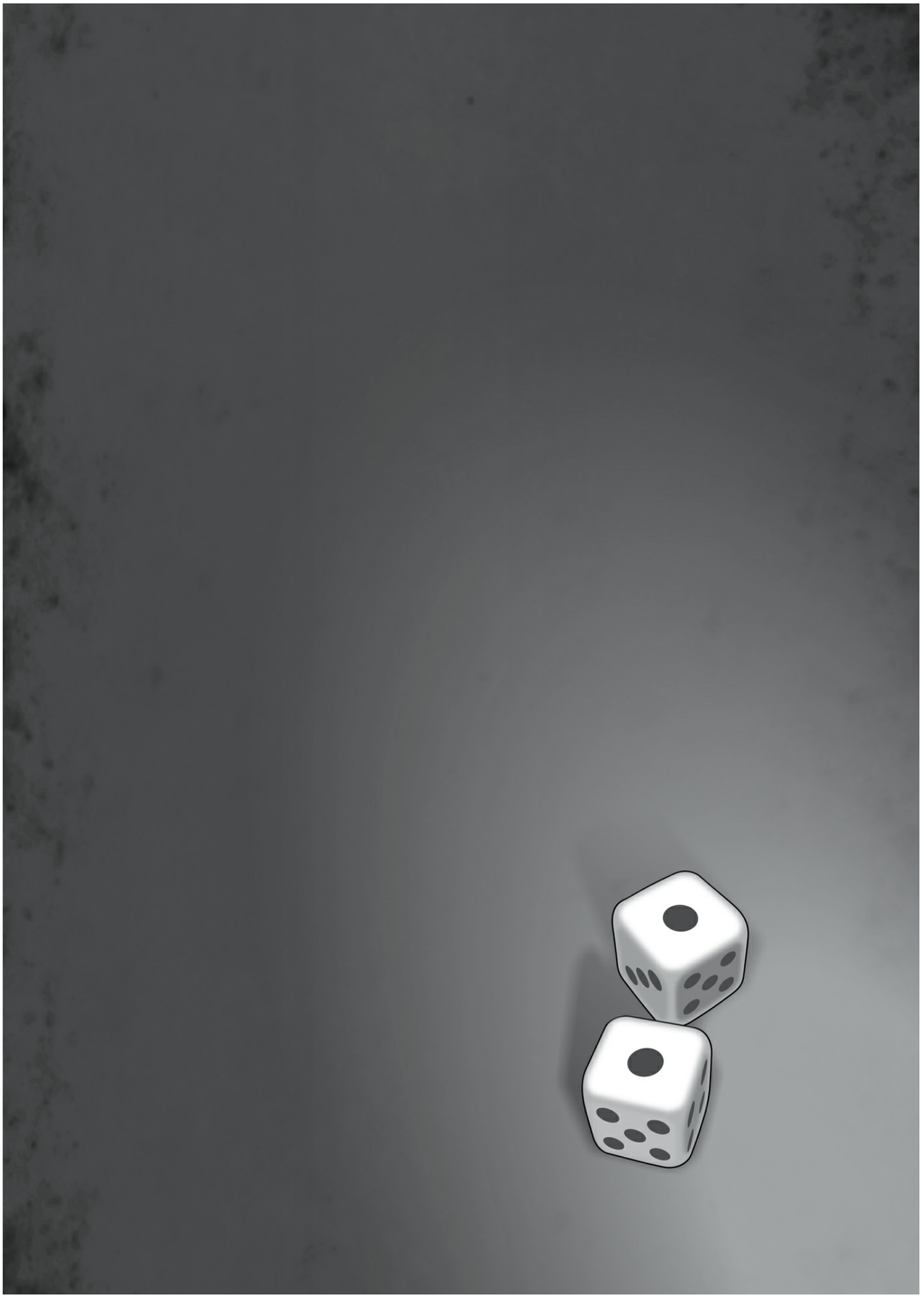
I wasn't sure if my past self on that day when we left Konigstuhl would be proud to see me as I was now, but Margit wasn't wrong. This wasn't the worst future I could envision for myself. After all, we had reached a point where if things went well, we could *slay a true dragon*—a feat fit for adventurers in the Age of Gods. If I turned my nose up at that, then the versions of me from more unfortunate futures would pelt me with rocks and rotten fruit from their place in the audience.

All the same, life never goes how you plan it...

[Tips] Erik of the Songless Sword is an adventurer who can be found in the Empire's northern reaches and the polar region. He has earned fame for his obsession with the raiders of Nifleyja and his announcements that he will bring all who raid and plunder to an ignoble end.

Despite being a layman, he has assembled a unit of vengeful warriors and received favor from a Fury. While cursed by the gods of another pantheon and their shamans, this monster still stands undeterred on the chaotic seas of the north. Many theorize that he has been unofficially sanctified, but he firmly denies this.

Those close to him often see him looking across the sea to the Empire's western reaches, but few know what exactly he left behind in Ende Erde.



Afterword

I packed so much into this volume—the ninth volume, but the tenth actual book, which is a weird feeling—that I don't have space for my Western-style list of acknowledgments or even my usual silly jokes. All the same, I am amazed by the fact that my first serialization has reached this point—it really has become quite the long campaign.

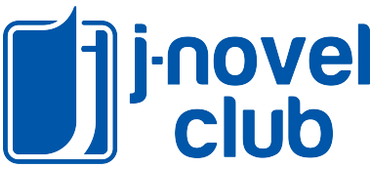
This volume is pretty much all-new material too. Yes, this stupid GM (that is, me) has done it again. When will I learn? I had intended to finish off this scenario in one volume, but the scale of it has meant that I've had to do another double volume. I really regret not expending more experience points in my Story Length and Plot Adjustment skills, but I hope that for all the readers of the web novel, you enjoyed reading an all-new story.

In the web novel, the Fellowship of the Blade was formed pretty quickly without much description, but this time around I wanted to flesh out the story behind that more. This story didn't come about because I asked Lansane to draw me a cat girl, okay? We clear?

This is a middle-length campaign comprising two parts so, naturally, I can't reuse anything from the web novel for the next volume, making it the continuation of this wholly novel story. I hope to see you in volume 9, canto II.

[Tips] The author uploads side stories and world-building details to @Schuld3157 on Twitter as "extra replays" and "rulebook fragments."

I wasn't given too many hard and
fast instructions, so I was free
to design this assassin just
the way I wanted.
Lan Sane



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Min-Maxing My TRPG Build in Another World: Volume 9 Canto I by Schuld

Translated by Arthur Miura Edited by Will Holcomb

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