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Min-Maxing
My TRPG
Build in
Another
World

Preach the Good Word
of Mr. Henderson



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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. "Wait, what, you died? But we've only just started!
I can't save you if you fumble!"
- 0.75:** A minor storyline takes the place of the main plot.
E.g. "I know that life is cheap in this world...but did you have to let the *leader* of your group die? Okay, we'll put the main story on hold and someone else can take the reins, so scribble up a new character sheet and join us a bit later, all right?"
- 1.0:** Some fatal mistake prevents the true ending from ever coming to fruition.
E.g. "We were meant to get this campaign wrapped up in five sessions—did you have to let the new leader die *again*?
You do realize that we're only on the third session and all your original characters are dead, right?"
- 1.25:** The GM condemns his players but tries to figure out how to continue in their next session.
E.g. "You guys are on your eighth new character! This is making it real hard to fit you into my original story. And you, Mr. I Died First, how many brothers did your original character have anyway?!"
- 1.5:** The party intentionally wipes.
E.g. "Huh? You used all the random character generation tables and came away with some freak who doesn't mesh *at all*?
Sure, whatever, I don't care anymore. Be my guest."
- 1.75:** The players commit genocide or otherwise move to bring the setting to its knees. The GM silently shuts his screen.
E.g. "Wait, wait, wait. Can we reschedule next week's session?
I can't keep throwing out all of my game prep and running the session by the seat of my pants like this."
- 2.0:** The main story is irreparably busted. The campaign ends.
E.g. The GM packs his things without a word.
- Over:** The realm of gods. Despite experiencing everything from 0.5 to 1.75, the players continue on for whatever reason—and somehow progress the story. After an unknowable amount of time, the characters find some new objective and dutifully complete it.
E.g. "And with nine lives lost in the process, despite going around in circles again and again, you've managed to work together to complete your original goal and receive the highest recognition from the Osakan yakuza. You know, I'm almost impressed that you somehow managed to derail this so much that you got back on track..."

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One Full Henderson Ver0.7





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.

The scene opened on a small room in the Snoozing Kitten.

It was a modest, well-cleaned four-person room; the beds and desks had been moved out to make room for a feast. In its center a motley selection of tables of approximate height had been pushed together to form a single dining space surrounded by seats of various sizes to match the height of their occupants. Anyone who knew any of their esteemed number would be champing at the bit for a chance to sit among them.

Sat at the head of the table was the group's leader: Fidelio, renowned as the Saintly Scourge of the Limbless Drake. His wife Shymar was snuggled up beside him, despite the meager space. To their sides were the saint's compatriots.

There was Rotaru the Windreader, a stuart whose entire efforts were presently focused on knocking away the cuts of cheese that his fellows endlessly pushed his way with jeers and laughter.

There was Hansel, a huge bald man known as the Bell Crusher, whose hand was clutched tightly around his cup in clear impatience for the first drink of the

night.

There was the Gourmand Zaynab, the party's mage, whose brown-skinned hands quivered in excitement to finally break into the meaty main dish that stood smack in the middle of the table.

And finally, at the two lowest seats at the table, there were two fresh-faced adventurers basking in the glory of their seniors. They were known around Marsheim as Goldilocks and the Silent, already renowned as a pair not to be trifled with.

Margit had taken up her usual place on Erich's lap, yet their usual cool demeanors were nowhere to be seen.

But that wasn't surprising in the slightest. They had been invited to a feast held by the hero *himself* after finishing a grand adventure that had lasted an entire season. Here they were in the party's inner circle, able to witness their glory firsthand, to hear every last detail of an epic quest bested by elite adventurers, so fraught with danger as to have grievously injured anyone less valiant than them. There was no way in all the world that they would be able to put a lid on their excitement.

Hansel had invited them on the grounds that it would be educational for the new adventurers to hear of Fidelio's adventures straight from the source, but the excited pair were on the edge of their seats to simply enjoy the tale; they were hardly in the frame of mind to take notes.

"All right then, has everybody got a drink?"

Encouraged by Fidelio's remark, everyone poured their preferred drink. Fidelio must have had quite some money to spare, for the table was lined with famous beverages purchased straight from the Wine God's temple. There were cheaper drinks too, but it was clear that they had gone all out for today.

"Very good. Now then, I would like to preface this with thanks to our God for favoring us with safe passage back ho—"

"Hurry it up already! You may be called a saint, but I don't remember you affiliating yourself with any parish!"

As Hansel brusquely cut off Fidelio's speech, the rest of the party burst out in

laughter. Lay preacher though Fidelio might have been, the fact that Hansel's call for him to stop with his stuffy speeches didn't ruin the mood hinted at either Fidelio's own good character or the group's natural bonhomie.

"Fine, fine! All right everyone—to our adventure!"

"To our adventure!"

The group all called out in unison with their cups raised—except for the two newbie adventurers, who were a beat behind the rest—before each downing their first drink.

The postadventure party was full of vivacity, as if to suggest to any onlooker that *this* was the only way a party should be. Lips were quenched with cups that refused to stay empty and looser tongues began to reminisce on the past adventure.

"Y'know, I gotta say, this time was actually pretty gnarly. To think that the deepest chamber of those ruins had been mazified!"

"I'm saying no to any adventures involving tight spaces for the next while. Us stuarths aren't actually rats, you know! I'm so done with crawling through pipes!"

Hansel was already on his third cup of a strong, unmixed spirit. His face bore a few fresh scars. Apparently Rotaru had undergone a similarly trying experience, for he had his own share of complaints. Looking closer at him, the stuart's beloved beard was frizzy at the edges—perhaps the last faint trace of a burn?

"I overused... I must be leaving the town for short while."

Zaynab was the party's only backline member, and so she didn't have any obvious injuries, but it was evident that she had used almost all of her catalysts during the strife. Not only was she a methuselah blessed with their natural penchant for magic, she was a first-class adventurer—and she didn't use second-class catalysts.

"The albino fox's skull now in tiniest of pieces... The biggest shame."

"What did you say it was again, some kinda rare artifact? Can't you just use a skull from a regular ol' fox? Just get Rotaru to help you hunt one down."

“Shut your trap, Hansel! I don’t intend to work for the next month. I am *not* hunting a single fox, thank you very much. Plus I can’t leave my place empty for too long or the owner gets on my tail about it. Just pick up a hunter from off the streets and help them make a little pocket money.”

“A normal fox skull will not be doing. Mystic albino foxes are not being so common.”

Zaynab was a maledictor—a career hex-slinger, her art obscure even among Imperial mages. In order to safely use a curse, one needed some kind of vessel or substitute to absorb the backlash from the spell. It seemed that Zaynab’s had come from a vanishingly rare and mystically potent specimen.

That went to illustrate just how dangerous an enemy they had faced.

“So, what kind of foe did you fight?”

Erich couldn’t hold back his curiosity any longer and asked the group. Fidelio gave a wry smile and began to tell of their tale:

In the westernmost reaches of the Empire lie many ruins and archaeological sites, the result of a period of endless civil war. Among these are not just carcass-cities choked with the dust of ages, but holy places of gods—gods with limited patience for the indignity of their ruin, as well as the power to wreak vast misfortune upon the world should They reach the limit of Their appeasement.

The Rhinian pantheon had once set about to welcome these gods—who had not only been ousted from Their homelands, but had also been long forgotten—as Their fellows. Some refused to acquiesce to this, choosing to lead themselves into abjection instead of joining the Rhinian pantheon.

The truth was, to be swallowed up by another pantheon of gods brought with it irreversible change. It wasn’t so simple as receiving a new Rhinian name and scribing some ceremonial chants in the local cant.

The gods exist upon a higher plane, on another level above the base reality of our world of height, depth, and breadth where mortals live. But as They are beings of thought and spirit, They are heavily affected by those who worship Them—Their believers.

Given this, the original qualities that these gods possess undergo an indelible change should They join another pantheon. Think of it like how some folk will bend themselves out of shape to get by in a new community.

Even if They joined the pantheon initially as an act, the longer the gods were forced to continue in this manner, the more Their mental state warped to match it, and thus the gods changed. Several deities across the land, unhappy with the ways They were changing, decided to retaliate in a battle They could not win; in the end, Their places of worship were razed to the ground, branded as heretical.

These old temples in the centers of state power were utterly destroyed, so that any trace of the old gods' legacies could be erased. Such treatment in the borderlands had not been so thorough, and to our loss, it had not been possible in Marsheim, absorbed as it was in its own martial bother.

It is true that here and there, the Empire did the bare minimum to destroy these places of worship or tear down their idols. However, in other places, to appease neighboring citizens, they simply barred entry to the temples. Doing such naturally led to the spiritual land growing stagnant, lingering feelings of vengeance thickening like pus, and whatever divinity that lay there festering in turn.

The adventure had called for Fidelio and his party to purge the last vengeful vestiges of these derelict deities, left behind in concession to the Empire's limited manpower and budget.

"It used to be a lamia village," said Fidelio. "There was a shrine hidden beneath one of the ruins that you could only get to through a small hidden passage."

"I expect it was, what, three centuries old? As Their believers dwindled, the god's divine protection grew weaker. When the last of the faithful up and left to gods-know-where, or their numbers reached zero, the god ended up perishing in front of Their own idol. It ain't no surprise that They were left with one or two lingering regrets, really."

Hansel spoke all while cutting up his premium steak—eating beef from overfed cows was a custom only among the Empire's noble class—with a sympathetic air, and in response everyone gathered gave a silent prayer.

Such tragedies were common the world over, but no one could remain completely steely eyed when faced with the reality. The fates of both the god, who gradually grew more resentful as Their believers dwindled to nothing, and those same believers from long ago, who died without Their grace, were tragic.

“Reports came in from a few folks from a nearby settlement, saying that there was a serpent, thick as a grown mensch from shoulder to shoulder, living in the city’s ruins. When we arrived, we found an ichor maze had formed right where the fallen god had breathed Their last. We’d made sufficient preparations, yet it was still quite the ordeal.”

“W-Was the serpent really that huge?!”

“Nah, rumors have a tendency to snowball, Goldilocks. It was, hmm, about half that size, I guess?”

Even so, that would mean its body was about a meter around. Who knew how *long* that meant it was, but if it swallowed a person, it would be impossible to tell from the outside. An utter monster was the only fitting description for it.

This hulking former god traveled through the sewers that remained below the ruins of the city, enlarged by the ichor maze that it had created. As the party heard the tales of previous adventurers who had tried to lay siege upon it, despite the mummies of the deceased believers that ruled the land, their respect simply increased for the poets of the time who had returned alive to pen their tales.

At any rate, the two new fresh-faced adventures at the table would have had no chance of surviving as they were right now. Even wasted away, even exhausted, the divine were on another level. It was no less true of the shell left behind when divinity dies.

But to think that this party of adventurers had taken on this beast, navigated the ichor maze, all while fending off the hordes of lesser foes in the space of a single season... This was no simple feat.

The well-renowned poet—lovingly called “the Catchpenny Scribbler” or “the Faux Poet” by Fidelio—had begged Fidelio to be present at the feast, saying that it would be difficult for him to cobble together a song that didn’t seem like a transparent exaggeration, but Fidelio had turned him down. It was easy to

imagine how much the poet would struggle in penning this tale.

“Although, an adventure like this might still be a ways off for you two. It isn’t every day that you bump into a fallen god, even here at ‘Ende Erde.’”

Buoyed on by the atmosphere of the crowd, Erich was pleasantly tipsy and so fully engrossed in the party’s tale that he didn’t consider any flags the conversation might have raised.

It was a fact that the Trialist Empire of Rhine’s pantheon of gods had taken root in this land too. Any gods that had openly sought to harm people had essentially all become subjugated after joining the Rhinian pantheon, and so worrying was, in all honesty, not a necessity.

“Although, it’s true that the stronger the foe, the more you seek to gain. It might be worth setting your sights this high at some point.”

“Yeah, you said it. The serpent’s hide that we got from this quest was pretty damn nice, I must say! We’ll need a real pro to work it, but I think we can make some light clothes that won’t make a sound out of it.”

“Ugh, I wish I got a cut of that beautiful hide... I coulda used it to pad my armor to make myself an even better frontliner than I am already!”

“C’mon Hansel, be happy that your scout will get some new fancy armor that’ll prevent him from dying in a stupid accident. If you ask me, you’re plenty hardy as you are!”

“Everyone is claiming spoils of the war. I am lamenting loss of the skull of the serpent...”

Zaynab pulled a bag from one of her inner pockets and opened it out upon the table to reveal a set of serpent fangs large enough to be mistaken for mensch daggers. Despite being separated from their venom glands, they could house powerful curses—ideal catalysts for Zaynab.

Despite her spoils, the mage was despondent. The party had been unable to bring back the venom glands—the part which contained the most power—unharmful, and not only that, they’d had to give up on taking back the serpent’s skull, which could be used as a hugely powerful cornerstone of curse magic.

“There was no blasted way we could’ve hauled that skull back! It was bigger than *me!*”

The task of moving a skull that outweighed an adult stuart would have been difficult for an army battalion with carriages; it was only natural that this party of four wouldn’t sacrifice everything else just for the sake of one coveted yet highly specialized treasure.

“Overly greedy adventurers dyin’ on the road back home is a tale as old as time. But you wouldn’t quit yappin’ on about it, so we used preservative medicine to bring this bloomin’ thing for you!”

Displayed proudly in the middle of the table was the main dish—a huge rack of ribs.

The two fresh-faced adventurers had been hesitant to dig in on the grounds that they were unsure *what* sort of meat it actually was, but to think such a tale lay behind it!

The serpent’s abdomen from the portion of the body nearer the head was Zaynab’s spoils, in addition to the aforementioned fangs. Fidelio was usually against holding postadventure parties at the Snoozing Kitten, but this huge piece of meat was the basis for his compromise.

After all, it was highly unlikely that a location unused to Fidelio’s party’s reputation would even agree to cook the damn thing. Serpents weren’t a regular menu item in the Empire, and a regular person wouldn’t even *consider* the act of consuming the corpse of a fallen god.

Zaynab had tested if the meat was poisonous back in the temple—which helped her case—and although everyone was enjoying it now, bringing something like this back was something that would usually not fly. But the party wasn’t superstitious, and so the maledictor’s appeals reached their flexibly pious leader’s heart.

The argument boiled down as follows: eating it and taking its strength for their own was the greatest offering and show of thanks they could make to the fallen god.

Zaynab’s argument, odd as it was, rang true, and so the other three agreed.

And so, the fallen god's meat had been carefully seasoned, coated in an alcohol-based sauce to rid it of its gamey flavor, then thoroughly cooked before being plated up.

“This is the meat from a serpent god, right? It...wasn't a god that resembled a massive lamia, was it...?”

“What rudeness. I am always seeking beauty in food. Eating people is against ideals.”

“Yeah, come on. If it had been humanfolk we would've all made sure to not even let that idea get off the ground.”

Even as the methuselah put on a rather hurt expression, Goldilocks couldn't help but feel a little exasperated—one's gustatory ethics shouldn't be reducible to something as basic as “Is it a person or not?” It was true that he'd eaten snakes once while he'd been roughing it, but who got into such hard times that they would think to eat a god?

No, considering Zaynab, it was more likely that if this was her original reason for signing on, then she would remain intractable in her ideals unless the situation was absolutely dire. She'd been so keen to join this adventure in the first place most likely because she had heard they would be encountering a huge serpent the likes of which didn't exist in the colder reaches of the west, which must have set her taste buds tingling.

At the group's insistence, the inn's young owner and party leader, Fidelio, unsheathed a huge dagger and began to slice the meat.

Despite it being in front of his eyes, the young adventurer was still incredulous that not only had this man slew and brought back this quarry, his wife had managed to cook it up. Just what had the Hearth Goddess been thinking as She looked upon the mortal realm at a kitchen blessed with Her favor, where the carcass of a foreign god had not only been cooked up, but plated so delectably?

While praying for the serpent god's peaceful rest in the afterlife, everyone (apart from the adventurer known as the Gourmand) bit into their herb-cooked meat with surprised expressions upon their faces.

For such a sacrilegious food, it tasted normal. Scrumptious, even.

The flesh was soft and juicy, unparalleled by any of the beef, pork, or fish arrayed around the central dish. While stewing in the pot, it had continued to absorb the heavy herb-based sauce that Shymar carefully kept adding for a plain yet rich, sophisticated flavor that lingered on the tongue.

It was difficult to ascertain whether it wasn't greasy because it had once been a regional deity or because of Shymar's skills in the kitchen, but at any rate the one who suggested this incredulous meal fortunately was not forced to take responsibility and eat the whole thing.

By the time several bottles and barrels of booze had run dry and the remains of the main dish were but licked-clean bones, the conversation had moved on to a sermon for the newbies on just how grueling an adventure could be.

"If I'm bein' frank, I thought this was another case of some countryside folk layin' it on thick with their rumors, with the monster seemin' bigger than they thought 'cause they were scared, but I guess sometimes a big ol' baddie is gonna end up waitin' for you."

Hansel was chewing on some good old regular pork, not serpent, as he gave his own advice to the adventuring pair, his tongue just possibly loosened by the alcohol.

Simply put, his advice was never to underestimate what looks like an easy gig.

Erich didn't need to be told. He had already experienced his fair share of grim turnabouts, after all. He had almost died on an errand from his former madam to pick up an old book, he had encountered all sorts of hardships on patrolling this same madam's new territory, and he didn't even know how many people he had ended up cutting down during the simple task of coming home.

That wasn't even factoring the pair's recent troubles in being dragged into a straight-to-home-video escapade just trying to live decent lives as adventurers. Yes, it had been driven straight into their bones that there was no such thing as a peaceful adventure.

All the same, hearing these tales of adventures in lands they had never been to and the accompanying tribulations was music to their ears.

“Oh, I’ve got a good one. Remember what, two years ago, when we were comin’ back from dealing with some bandits and we ran into that checkpoint some local bigwig had put up?”

“Oh yeah! Ugh, what an ass. Looking down on me just ‘cause I’m a stuart.”

“Agreed. Unless you’re *not* talkin’ metaphorically, of course.”

“Piss off, that was totally unnecessary! You better wear armor to bed tonight, Hansel, so help me gods!”

“Bad thing happened once distant time ago. Before meeting of this party. In time when the speaking of Rhinian was not possible. Did not have understandings of legmacy...legitimimicy...rightness of checkpoints. Did not know meaning of ‘stop.’ Lots of money...taken away.”

“Yeah, if I recall, after we told you what the rules are you went and cursed the lot of them, eh? You, what was it, cursed the money that would end up going into their pockets, right?”

“Money... Gold... It is root of evil. Easy to curse. Goldilocks, a warning for you. To be picking up change on ground could cost life.”

It was clear to Erich that in the western region of the Empire, it was dangerous going whether you were in a city or out. In particular, forces who were outwardly faithful toward the Empire didn’t hesitate to stoop to crime in their rural lands, far from the eyes of a margrave.

For this tale in particular, the local residents had gathered up all the money they could to hire the adventurers to oust some bandits who had holed up in an abandoned fortress—Erich was surprised that such a hackneyed way of living was possible—and after defeating them, they had been stopped at an illegally raised checkpoint and forced into a fight that was supposed to show them their place.

The moral of the story was that unless the local knights and nobles had been dispatched from the heart of the Empire, they had a tendency to be a disagreeable sort. They liked to claim the feats of others for their own, turning in criminals that had been captured by others and taking the bounties for themselves. Their pursuit of power pushed them into barbarity.

It was evident that the common knowledge that fraud was a mark of shame didn't apply to them. Erich too had once taken up the words of a certain demon who said "It's not a crime if you don't get caught," but it was a frustrating situation when the situation was reversed.

"Two years ago, huh... Was that the rug store incident? Rotaru, you remember, don't ya? It was where some of your kids work or somethin'."

"Ahh! Yeah, I'll never forget that! Those knight bastards who would attack a caravan of merchants if they were friendly with the government!"

The stuart's beard twitched with rage.

Unlike most adventurers, Rotaru had a family and threw himself into adventures to put food on the table. Stuarts were biologically inclined to have many children, and Rotaru could never have enough money to send his twelve sons and daughters to private schools and provide them with a decent life.

In many ways, Rotaru was the odd one out when it came to his family. Although he didn't personally speak the palatial tongue, he had managed to send every single child to private school; many of his children had managed to find decent jobs at large businesses.

Erich was hugely curious what parental education had led to none of Rotaru's children succumbing to the call of an adventurer's life, despite their father being a frontliner for the saint himself.

However, he wasn't yet close enough to inquire into Rotaru's family situation without accidentally upsetting him, so he silently listened to the lesson. Erich, too, had reached his thirties in his previous life, and was fully aware that derailing a story would merely push the point of the conversation even further away. This was especially true when alcohol was going around.

"You really gotta keep an eye on those who have power, Silent, Goldilocks. If you see a noble with 'von' in their name around these parts it ain't nothing more than window dressing. I learnt my lesson when I was just a kid. If any of my daughters even so much as chats up a so-called noble, I can kiss them goodbye to a life as one of their wives."

"Yeah, I ain't got any good memories with that lot either to be honest. Nothin'

worse than a rotten magistrate.”

“Wait a second... So the canton where you slew the limbless drake was...”

“Yep, overseen by a knight who was affiliated with an influential house. If the viscount hadn’t been an understanding sort I expect I would have ended up bringing him to Margrave Marsheim’s manor myself.”

It was untrue that Margrave Marsheim was merely neglecting the provincial areas; rather, he was struggling to find the best manner in which to get the vengeance-glutted bigwigs stationed under him to open their hearts. However, despite a reshuffle of the foreign noble’s local underlings, he had little success in his attempts to create a network across these powerful houses.

This was no real surprise. In Japan, it was a group of scary southern samurai who had managed to overthrow a military government that had leeches money from across the country for over 250 years. While Margrave Marsheim had successfully taken the head of the previous king, he had also erected a bust of this man in front of the imperially gifted bathhouse. Any who wouldn’t be swayed would merely find it even more frustrating.

Vengeance lies deep within one’s bones. The local powerhouses would stop at nothing if it meant causing trouble for the Empire. This was a lesson from his seniors that Erich had carved deep into his heart.

“We are outliers. People give job, then they throw us away. Important lesson.”

“I’d hate to agree with her, but it’s exactly as Zenab says. I’m a man who’s not on a family register, who hasn’t even got a fixed place to live. If you end up takin’ this whole thing lightly, thinkin’ you’re nothin’ more than a hired arm to cut down your employer’s enemies, then you’ll end up somewhere no good.”

Hansel was in agreement with Zaynab, who was sucking at the marrow of the serpent god’s ribs. Although he always had a cheerful front, it seemed he had quite a difficult past.

Indeed, there was a time where adventuring had acted as a place of refuge for people like that. Not everyone would hire someone whose identity couldn’t be verified. And so, the only paths left to those cast out by society were to

stoop to crime or to pray for incredibly good luck as they searched for a kindhearted employer; but either option posed its own pile of administrative problems.

Because of this it made sense to receive the good graces of the Adventurer's Association and do a few boring jobs to make a little quick coin. In times of hardship, it seemed like even the abode of those heroes who lived outside the shackles of national borders drawn in the Age of Gods couldn't escape the humdrum realities of daily life.

"Take care when choosin' your client. This goes especially for when you're gettin' clients outside of Marsheim. I know that won't be far off for you, Erich."

"Thank you kindly for the advice, Mister Hansel."

"People around town keep wary of rumors, which means upright jobs are still goin' about. Ah, you better keep your guard up too, Silent. You might find yourself on a quest to do a little investigation, then next thing you know, you find yourself strung up as an accomplice for attempted robbery. It's not easy to prove your own good name."

"We're really grateful to learn how to avoid these common pitfalls. Thank you, Mister Rotaru."

"Aw, quit it. Call me Rotaru. It makes my beard twitch to hear a young lady call me 'Mister.'"

The conversation had taken a grave turn, but still the festivities continued.

By the end, Shymar was shouting at the wasted men of the group, and if the awful scene of two adventurers on wobbly legs cleaning up their own vomit was omitted from the poet's tale, it was a fitting ending to a grueling adventure that the poet would enjoy fashioning into a song.

However, there was something that Goldilocks, who was helping to tidy up with the landlady, didn't realize because he had far exceeded his limits despite his Heavy Drinker trait... He had completely missed the common rule that in TRPGs, when the PCs are told to be careful, it usually signals that danger is sure to come.

[Tips] Marsheim is managed as an administrative state of the Empire and is ruled by nobles from its central region. However, they are struggling to deal with the local powerhouses, with no indication of forward progress.

Autumn of the Sixteenth Year

Merging Parties

Just as parties can disband due to the circumstances of players, so too can players merge their parties partway through a campaign. There are times when a small party (two to three players) wants to begin a long campaign; this can be the perfect opportunity for merging parties.

Unexpected circumstances and meetings can lead to new party formations. Just because people have to drop out or it's difficult for a party to continue on their quest as they are doesn't mean that each individual PC's adventure must end too.

There is an expression from my old world: "Autumn is when the skies are high and horses are fat," referring to how the best days of fall provoke big appetites, even among horses. It came to me as the perfect summation of the autumn I turned sixteen. This season brought with it another change.

"Congrats!"

"Thank you so much!"

I'd changed out the soot-black tag that signified my status as an adventurer for ruby-red. Saying that, I was ruby-red in name only; the steel strips that displayed our names simply had simply been painted over, but to me they shone as brightly as the real things.

We were chicks that had finally emerged from our eggshells, and so to the public, we were still amateurs with pieces of shell stuck to our tail feathers. I couldn't let myself get too carried away from simply reaching the second level.

"But my, it is rare for anyone to reach ruby-red this quickly."

Miss Thais, who had become a close acquaintance of mine—she was the one who suggested the job at a restaurant and had seven kids, apparently—said this

as she looked at the notes on my reports.

It's true that she had told me that it usually took around half a year to be promoted, so I suppose only taking one season was rather fast. In my old world, this would be like a new employee at a listed company jumping up to manager or assistant manager in only two years.

"Well, I could probably count the number on one or two hands. It is awfully quick, even considering your good work," interjected Miss Eve as she made calculations on an abacus while she read over some documents.

"And everyone was quick to write back their reports on your work too."

Miss Eve placed a triangular paper placard on the desk to indicate that opening hours were over—such visual shorthand seemed pretty similar no matter the world—and was clearly working on some accounting. The fact that she could join in the conversation while constantly working through her figures spoke to her ability.

"Newbies are usually left on the bench, with the nobles favoring higher-ranked adventurers. How strange."

"Well, I always knew that he was capable since the day he stepped in our door!" Miss Coralie said as she came out of the back, holding a small, labeled cashbox. She sat down at her station as her colleagues chuckled at her. It was easy for them to say stuff like this after the fact, but it felt nice to be complimented nonetheless.

"If word gets around that you're well regarded, unsavory types will behave themselves. I'll start putting in a good word for you."

"But, wow, it really is quick... Remember that other kid? He was promoted, but his tag got lost in the shuffle. He ended up going on a rampage saying how we forgot about him."

"Yes, it was a huge shame... But that's no reason to get in a big fistfight in the plaza."

Strictly speaking, the Association wasn't a public office, but in many ways it functioned like one. Work that no one could be bothered to do was often put on the back burner, and in worst-case scenarios, documents and the like would

be forgotten about. My experiences with public offices back in Japan had all been really good, where you would get the documents you needed if you simply went and waited a while, but that obviously didn't apply everywhere.

Not only that, I supposed that the Association didn't want to decrease the number of low-level adventurers who could sweep up all the grunt work around the city. If the city was flooded with high-level adventurers, the hiring costs would also start to balloon.

"You know, usually anyone in personnel could verify a promotion from soot-black, so it's very strange that the manager's stamp was on yours."

Miss Thais waved my form in front of her as she said this and, sure enough, there was a huge seal on the bottom along with the other seals.

I supposed the one that wasn't as gaudy as a noble's seal—typically intricate and decorated with shields or crowns—but was still a bit too fancy to be a regular private seal belonged to the manager of the Association. The seal didn't have any imagery that was only permissible for nobles, but the tasteful clover design was not cheap in the slightest.

Ah. Now that I think about it, the manager was the illegitimate child of a noble.

"Who knows why. Maybe she just happened to have some time on her hands."

"How did a form on such poor-quality paper even make its way to her?"

"I borrowed her seal when I delivered a medical infusion once. It's not that strange, you know."

The picture behind this strange situation that these women were twittering about slowly came into view.

Family crests were often shared by creating a new crest that was themed off the main family's one. For example, the Trialist imperial house's Baden family had a crest that was consolidated under a horse motif. The family crest of the Mars-Baden family followed this pattern too, and the margrave's crest featured a leaping horse whose head was turned to face behind it, so I assumed that a crest with clovers—often used as horse feed—would be related to the Baden

family if but tangentially.

Although the manager was known to be the illegitimate child of a noble, no one knew whose; most postulated that she was the daughter of the former Margrave Marsheim. In other words, the older half sister of the current Margrave Marsheim.

Here she was, working in the public sector to help her noble younger brother with managing the city. It would be stranger if someone like her was unaware of the various goings on in the city.

If your average adventurer was aware of the turf wars that resulted from scuffles between big clans, then it would be natural to assume that the manager of the Adventurer's Association, Maxine Mia Rehmann, knew them all like the back of her hand.

The role of adventurer was but a shell of what it once was, but Maxine was a bridge between the nobility and common folk; the standing protector of a pact struck during the Age of Gods which stipulated that the total dominion of any royal family and their court over the lay classes could never stand. All signs suggested she was quite the chessmaster, and each piece in her army held a treasure trove of information.

Taking this into consideration, this premature promotion was most likely a deliberate reward—a little treat that said “Thank you, little boy, for giving an insubordinate clan a little smack. Now be a dear and keep up the good work.”

Ugh, this was why being part of a society was so *tiring*. Whatever you do and wherever you go, people's inner desires were so obvious. All the same, I couldn't complain—a promotion was a promotion. As an adventurer who wanted to climb the ranks, I'd gladly receive the honor, even if my ambitions were a bit on the nose, thank you very much.

I suppose we could view this as the manager's quite literal seal of approval. If the expectation that came with this present was to not cause any trouble, then her opinion of us couldn't be all too bad. If we were viewed as a nuisance, then it would have been no skin off her back to eliminate us. Or she'd have taken the opposite tack from her present strategy and tried to freeze us out, encouraging us to take our services elsewhere.

“Yes, but they managed to round up a whole bunch of brigands despite being soot! Wouldn’t it be natural for her to want to dote on her capable new youngsters?”

I simply gave Miss Thais a modest smile, masking any evidence that I could sense the hidden motives at play.

“Come now, I’d hardly say we rounded them up! We just chased them off. Right, Margit?”

Bodyguard jobs were rarely given to those of Infrared (aka soot-black) rank, so Laurentius’s group had invited us on one of their own, where we encountered...a little assault. Laurentius’s group were all skilled in their own right, but despite that, as well as mine and Margit’s help, we only managed to capture five of them by the time the fray drew to a close. Still, I guess on paper even that result looked pretty damn compelling.

These three women had done a lot for us, so I had no intention of worsening their perception of us. I would do my best to play the part of earnest adventurer, and at the end of the day it was true that I was an adventurer-hopeful, whether I acted that way or not.

“Exactly, we only managed to round up five of them. ‘Excellent job’ is far too much of an overstatement in my eyes.”

“Yeah. I think we could only call it a real job well done if we could take after our seniors and hunt down a drake or a fallen god, really.”

“Ha ha ha! Silent, Goldilocks, you...do set your sights high.”

“C-Come on, you can allow yourselves to be a bit more proud! If you treat that job so coolly I’ll start to feel bad for the brigands you rounded up.”

“Yes, those sorry fools have got a real great view from wherever they’re staying.”

Why were they so awkward about our show of humility? Surely the frowns on the receptionist ladies’ mouths must be my imagination. I mean, come on—for a TRPG player, bagging a few brigands is as boring and trivial a job as smashing a piggy bank for the coins inside!

“Well...anyway. You’ll be able to take on ruby-red requests from here on out. They should have a bit more meat to them than what you’ve done so far, so throw yourselves right into it.”

“Knowing you two, I doubt you’ll let it get to your head, but do your best, y’hear?”

“We’ll be cheering you on from here.”

“Thank you so much, kind ladies. We look forward to continuing our patronage here.”

I tried to put on a courteous response with a tinge of palatial speech and was rewarded with chuckles of, “Kind ladies, he says!” Oho—had I earned the praise of my senior adventurers *and* my elders?

“Well, today we’ve got a little celebration in the works, so we won’t be issuing any requests for today.”

“Can I have a little browse of what’s on offer?”

“Of course, that won’t hurt.”

I thanked Miss Thais—who had dealt with my forms—again and glanced over the jobs on offer, even if I couldn’t take any of them right away. I figured that if I scouted out my options early it’d make picking out a good one tomorrow go that much smoother.

The requests were all posted on a row of bulletin boards on the left side of the main room in the Association. The frame of each board was color-coded so that adventurers would immediately know which jobs were for them. There were black, red, and yellow boards, at a ratio of about 5:3:1.

For requests that were sorted under higher ranks, adventurers could go to the reception desks and inquire about what was on offer. It was far quicker for adventurers in those markets to just go and ask than to bother with the effort of checking the postings.

Not only that, as the difficulty of requests increased, it was natural that the clients would want to keep certain intel secret. Prices could fluctuate wildly if rumors about what a noble wanted got out.

As I approached the wall of requests, the scribes who stood by the bulletin boards like wolves awaiting their prey, as well as the Association's other literate employees hungry for some walking-around money, all cleared out of the way in a hurry; they knew I wasn't in need of their services.

All this lurking and hovering was completely natural; reading was a relatively exclusive talent in this world. A large portion of the requests I had seen thus far had been illustrated so that the illiterate clientele could get a gist of the details and reward, or used a pool of simple vocabulary that got the message across.

These images were more than suitable for simple requests that offered equally low rewards. However, if you really wanted to enjoy the tasks that this board had on offer—being cost-effective really does add up—then you would need to ask someone literate or invest in learning those skills yourself.

Considering this, the do-it-yourself world that I used to live in, where everyone was taught how to talk, read, and write in a common language, was a compassionate one.

“These requests are starting to look like actual adventurers' jobs, aren't they?”

“Yeah. Although it's mostly fetch quest stuff.”

I had quickly scanned the red-framed boards, but most of the requests weren't that much harder than soot ones, nor did they offer much more in terms of compensation. The only real palpable change was that we could take requests from the cantons around Marsheim, but they were only a hair above chores a child could do. All the same, it was true that the material in general was feeling a bit more on-theme.

For example, there were some requests that the clients felt they couldn't leave to bottom-rank soot-level adventurers, like delivering letters or goods outside of the city, or bodyguard jobs where the goal was more of a bluff than anything, a way to cheaply increase the size of a person's entourage. Others were stopgap solutions, stationing adventurers in a canton to scare off groups of bandits wandering nearby.

It was a small change compared to the world of soot-black level, and if we tried we could earn slightly more coin, so it was a result to be proud of. From

here on out a stroke of bad luck could bring real danger with it; we needed to be careful going forward.

“Hey.”

With the change in our tag color, I was all ready to pull up my bootstraps and attempt these requests, when someone had suddenly called out to me. The voice seemed to belong to a boy, and when I turned, I saw exactly the sort of person I'd expected.

“You're Goldilocks Erich, yeah?”

He looked to be my age—maybe slightly younger—with black, disheveled hair and a scar across his cheek. His eyes drooped a little, and behind them lay a sharp, confident gaze that yet brimmed with a naive ambition. I felt like at any moment a text box would appear somewhere around him that read *the Protagonist*.

He was dressed in travel wear that looked easy to move in and made me wonder if he was about to head out on a job. Behind him was a girl, who was smiling awkwardly. Her long robe and staff, as well as her mortar-and-pestle-themed accessories, screamed “I'm a mage!” Judging from the simple wooden accessories, I assumed she was a healer.



You didn't see this every day. Although a mage was a fixture for a party worth their salt, it was incredibly rare to see a young, novice mage out adventuring. I had only been an adventurer for one season myself, but this was the first time I'd met a mage my age in this line of work.

If I had to ballpark a figure, I would say there were probably twenty people who couldn't use magic for every mage. I think my own sense of normalcy had been completely dulled from my time at the Imperial College—that hive of scum and sorcery—but magic was just that uncommon in a normal city.

This was especially so when you looked at the adventurer community. Putting aside the charlatans trying to pass as the real deal, magic was a rare enough talent to allow you to get by on its own.

You could earn considerable renown working as a doctor in the countryside. Many found roles as assistants to knights, and others were picked up by a magistrate and bestowed with the honor of being sent to the College of Magic, just like my good old chum had been.

It would be easier to regard anyone with the talent choosing to become an adventurer as just a little messed up in the head. Of course that applied even to me, despite the fact that I hid my skills from everyone I met.

I just need you to understand how *peculiar* this scene was.

I had once had a look at some of the party recruitment requests out of my own sadistic curiosity; almost all of them came from self-proclaimed warriors or swordsmen.

It was just like people who put up fliers looking for people to join their band. I'm sure most schools or colleges had them—posters that say nothing more than “I'm on lead vocals, got it?” but are still looking for people to come and help out. Just as difficult as throwing yourself into practicing something to become a renowned figure in that field, learning magic was a pursuit that required a lot of skill and practice, so this came as no surprise really.

I had decided long ago to become an adventurer alongside Margit, so we had been enjoying our time as a married couple—just joking, I should say as a “newly formed party”—so when I had read these recruitment requests back

then, I hadn't paid them much heed. But with all this in mind, it was a rare thing to see a mage and warrior standing right before me.

All the same, she exuded an air of innocence. The quality of her staff wasn't too remarkable, and from what I could see, she didn't seem to house an incredible well of mana or anything.

Unless she was actively using a formula to hide her abilities, I pegged her as a beginner mage who still had things to learn and was probably as capable as a student at the College—maybe slightly less.

Despite the boy's strangely aggressive stare and his friend's inability to hold him in line, I didn't sense any ill will from them and I felt a sense of nostalgia spread through my heart, so I decided to respond to them kindly.

I mean, come on, they were *the* picture of fledgling adventurers! A two-person party of a boy and a girl, still wet behind the ears, like they'd only just left their rinky-dink village in the countryside. They might as well have been a couple of pregens fresh out of the starter set. I sorely wanted to add them to my Connections column on my character sheet.

"I don't recall having introduced myself to you, but yes, I am Erich. Who might you be?"

"Gack, metropolitan speak, huh? Tch, someone's up his own ass... M-My name's Siegfried of Illfurth! I'm gonna become a swordsman on par with the heroes from the sagas!"

For a moment I wanted to say, "Siegfried? What a vulgar name," but then I realized that joke would only work in my old world (and even then, only in a pretty tight circle of real sci-fi diehards), so I kept it to myself.

He announced his name with great gusto, but Illfurth was a rural canton not too far from Marsheim. Not only that, the name Siegfried was, as chance would have it, the name of a hero in this world too—a man from the Age of Gods, renowned as the "Slayer of the Foul Drake." I doubted that some commoner would simply name their son that...

"Siegfried, you say? I'm Erich of Konigstuhl. And with me..."

"My name is Margit, also of Konigstuhl. A pleasure."

As we introduced ourselves with the same energy we always did, the pair seemed to be shocked—they took a half step back.

I wondered why. Was it our palatial tongue that they were unused to hearing? From his rare name I had thought for a moment that he might be the illegitimate son of some magistrate, but that seemed unlikely. His crude diction seemed to come very naturally to him, and it was a far cry from the difficulty that a noble boy would find in trying to code-switch far below his station.

“C-Come on, Dee, you gotta use your real name...”

“Shut your trap, Kaya! I told you to call me Sieg!”

As the mage girl—Kaya, apparently—replied to Siegfried, the pieces fell into place.

I know your plight too well, young man. I know the desire to shed your hated countryside name and take on a new one as you enter the big city. To be honest, my own name sounded pretty stupid to me, but I paid it no real heed—it was a name my parents had picked out just for me, after all. But, yeah, I could see why some people would be a bit self-conscious.

A canton’s temple would have the local registry, but when you were in the city you were free to present yourself however you liked. You could pick a cool name and take it up with just a bit of mental effort. Even military commanders back in the Sengoku Era did it.

Let he who never once considered changing his boring-ass name to something way cooler during his middle school years cast the first stone.

“Wh-What the hell is that look for?!”

“My apologies.”

My eyes had taken on the glaze of a nostalgic middle-aged man. You can’t blame me—it was a heartwarming scene! This kid had come to the city with his childhood friend to make a name for himself and had decided to change his provincial name into one taken from a bona fide hero. *Mm-hmm, yup, you are the spitting image of a Level 1 team and it’s awesome.*

Holding the desire to become his friend secret, I asked him why he called out

to us; he pointed his forefinger straight at me—I wanted to scold him for manners on the spot—but he merely announced that he wouldn't lose next time.

“You say next time, but we've literally only just met. At least I don't remember going on a job with you before.”

“Yeah, but you beat me! You got promoted before I did! I became an adventurer just this summer!”

Aha. He *had* become an adventurer at the same time as me, then. He had gotten his adventurer tag, seen our seniors prattling on about clans and whatnot, and decided that wouldn't be for him—he would be the quickest of his fellow newbies to get to ruby-red.

Then he had developed a rivalry with me, with my head start on making a name, but since he couldn't get me alone, he hadn't been able to confront me yet. And then finally, on the day we officially overtook him, he managed to talk to me.

Ugh, this sucks—we could've had some fun adventures if we'd only met earlier.

“I'm gonna overtake you in no time and become the best new adventurer! Then I'm gonna become the best adventurer in all of Ende Erde! Gah! I said quit with that look! You remind me of my freakin' gramps!”

So he had spoken to me, his new friendly rival, all for the sake of announcing this challenge. He's your stereotypical gutsy kid who wants to make it big—how could I not look at him with a softhearted expression?

“My apologies. I meant nothing by it. My face just tends to go like that.”

“Right... If you say so.”

“Indeed. I am sorry if I made you uncomfortable. But we're beginning our journey at the same time, so as fellow adventurers let's get along and mutually encourage each other, shall we?”

“Mu...chu... Say that again?”

He was looking at me askance with narrowed eyes, but man, could I just

ignore a fellow adventurer *this* fun to tease? No way. Judging from his frame, he looked to be like me, a light swordsman who favored maneuverability. We were two peas in a pod—we should totally have gotten along.

“If you like, let’s work a gig together sometime.”

I smiled as I held out my hand. I realized in this moment that although I had been involved with senior adventurers, Margit and I had been so focused about seeing what we could do on our own that we hadn’t gotten to know any adventurers of our own level.

It had been a long time since I’d had normal interactions as an adventurer. People would continually try to antagonize me or challenge me or try to use me for their own gains, dammit.

This had the same refreshing joy that you get when you down a fizzy drink on a hot summer’s day, you get me?

Even having this angry boy smack away my hand was fun in and of itself, and I was on cloud nine at this refreshing new acquaintance.

[Tips] It goes without saying that an adventurer’s status is decided by their skill, but as the trust between the Association and their clients is also on the line, adventurers are not only judged on the quality of their work, but also their character. While you can rise up from a low level if you work earnestly, if you want to reach the middle levels, greater assets than just your character or your work ethic are called for.

To the fledgling adventurer, Siegfried of Illfurth, *he* was a complete abnormality.

No, that wasn’t quite right—Erich of Konigstuhl was a bewildering aberration to *every new adventurer in Marsheim*.

The way he stood with his lean, muscular frame was like a blade at the ready or a spear with a heavy iron core. His golden hair that had earned him his moniker was more beautifully maintained than any noble girl’s hair. His metropolitan speech came off like an act, and yet it was somehow effortless.

Blue eyes were said to be the jewels of any debutant, yet his glittered far more vividly than a canton festival's prized gemstones. His slender build was similar to Siegfried's, yet it showed no trace of weakness. His only accessory was a famous sword that had cut down countless foes.

Such thoughts pinballed around in Siegfried's spacious and spartan brain at the sight of his peculiar comrade. As he noticed all of these differences, a tiny white-hot flare of fury sprang up in his train of thought—one he wisely tamped down.

The boy must have been born to a well-off house. He was a far cry from Siegfried's own upbringing as the third son of a dyed-in-the-wool peasant family, so poor that even his grandfather—who should have retired by now—was forced to work the fields or chop wood just to survive.

Siegfried hated his upbringing. He hated not amounting to even a side character in the heroic sagas; it held such sway over him that he chose, as his own peasant vernacular put it when anyone sought to take up the adventurer's life from the bottom rung up, to cover himself in soot.

And the nature of his work had ensured that by the end of every day since, the expression would prove quite literal.

Siegfried decided against taking supplies from his already impoverished home; instead he'd sneaked supplies from the local guard he'd trained under. He had been let off with an "I'll make an exception for a penniless brat," and so that he wouldn't disgrace his family further, he'd made off with some leftover gear that was almost totally on its way out; his equipment hardly did a thing.

The adventurer before Siegfried looked nothing like how an adventurer should, covered in mud and dirt, too cheap to waste a few coins on the public bath. Instead, his clothes were clean, his face was spotless (even taking into consideration that he might not have headed out to work yet), and he even had an incense bag under his shirt.

The arachne girl hanging off of him like a knapsack wasn't quite on the same level, but her clothes were well tailored and maintained. From what Siegfried had heard, his fine sword wasn't your usual run-of-the-mill mass-produced thing, and it made his own sword, the edge of which would never come out

perfectly straight no matter how much he honed it, look like a pathetic sight. It made Siegfried's jealousy rise ever more. What the hell was this?

What's more, despite Siegfried's bellicose attitude, Erich had managed to brush off this antagonism with all the coolness in the world. Siegfried was only more frustrated that he couldn't even hate the guy properly—now how was he supposed to let off all this pent-up frustration?

“Dammit... This won't help me in the slightest.”

Siegfried muttered to himself in a voice so small it almost didn't make it past his teeth; his fellow adventurer, always one step—no, *so many* steps—ahead of him, walked out of the Association building with a light tread.

No human feeling was quite so loathsome to Siegfried as envy; it was a commonplace failing back home, and one that cheapened the spirit of the whole canton.

A hero, he reasoned, envied no one.

What would jealousy gain him? He might as well have been chewing gravel—it wouldn't fill his stomach or cause the barren fields to grow thick with wheat. If he was going to stew in his own grasping insecurities, then he was obliged to spend that time doing something useful with them, like training his sword arm or getting on with some side job.

Back in the canton, even if each individual earning was small and a generation's work might not secure a bigger harvest or land of their own to grow it on, they could eventually buy hoes with better blades to them.

Siegfried knew that this future was his lot. The family wasn't rich enough to send even their oldest child to the private school run by the local village head and they were still unmarried. Despite this, Siegfried's father didn't put his effort into his work, but into idle complaints about the local landlord's cut of his yield as he drowned his sorrows in booze.

I won't be like him. That was the thought in Siegfried's head as he had fled from his canton; now here he was, cursing himself for this faint whisper of envy.

After all, he knew that he was blessed in his own way.

“You okay, Dee?”

“I’m fine. And Kaya, how many times have I told you to call me Siegfried? Or at least Sieg!”

Yes, he was blessed with a partner, despite her continued failure to remember his new name. By his side was the fledgling healer from Illfurth, Kaya.

In normal circumstances, someone of her social standing wouldn’t be in a place like this. Kaya was the daughter of a healer who worked a circuit of the local cantons. Kaya was a mage in her own right, and more revered than the village head or even the magistrate—and yet she had tossed aside her future to come along with Siegfried and shore up his dreams. When Siegfried was as blessed as this, what right did he have to even dare to be jealous?

Especially since Kaya had come of her own accord, without Siegfried even asking her to.

“Find us a job.”

“Ah, yeah, got it. Want me to read some out?”

Just how many adventurers were out there struggling to find stalwart allies? A simple glance at the bulletin board, with the sorry state of all of its party recruitment requests, was enough to remind him of how lucky he was.

What Kaya read out wasn’t great. Siegfried’s fellow village-deserters weren’t all so lucky to have someone who would daub themselves in soot with them. It was only a lucky few who could form a fixed party. You needed to meet the right complete strangers, then prove you were capable enough to earn their lasting trust.

Yet here Siegfried was with a *mage* in his party, of all people. With such a vanishingly rare ally, what business did he have envying anyone?

“Hey, Dee? How about this one? It’s a request from an herb wholesaler—they want someone to help count inventory. Looks like they want somebody literate and familiar with herbs.”

“Sure, why not? But unloading stock, huh... Seems tough for so little.”

All the same, a full day's work between the two of them would net them two librae. That said, two-thirds of the work would be Kaya's. If Siegfried were to attempt the job alone, he wouldn't be able to take the job at all, and he would have to subsist on jobs that were worth half or even a quarter of the pay.

Hence the presence of the clans. By borrowing the might of senior adventurers, they would introduce better jobs (in exchange for a cut of the pay, of course) and you could meet other adventurers through the clan.

It was pure luck that Siegfried had avoided being roped into one; if he had left his canton a moment later or earlier, his fate would have been different. If he had joined one, perhaps he could have afforded a higher class of gruel—possibly even the occasional stew with some meat in.

But that was the envy talking again; he had to look ahead. Bitching or pleading or praying for a beautiful moment of schadenfreude wouldn't rescue him—only a clear view of what was in front of him could do that.

That was the whole reason Siegfried had neglected his duties at home and left for the wider world.

As his childhood friend stood on her tiptoes to grab the request paper, Siegfried reached up and got it for her. In that moment, he felt eyes on his back, and he turned.

A group of adventurers were loitering over by the wall. It didn't look like they were waiting to use the Association's services or checking the bulletin board for fresh requests. They were quite plainly sizing up Siegfried and Kaya. It wasn't a pleasant stare. It was the sort of look you gave produce, not people.

“Great... Wonder which clan these bastards are headhunting for.”

Siegfried grabbed the request with a violent tug to assuage some of his anger, then kept Kaya close to him as they left the building at a brisk pace. He might have been a gawking hayseed, but he knew that, here or back in the canton, Kaya's fame painted a bit of a target on her head. The clans were incessant in their pursuit of her. Time and time again some new creep or pack thereof would turn up; the ordeal of fighting off the especially pushy recruiters had already cost Siegfried two chipped teeth.

Kaya had worked her magic and reattached his broken incisors, but the memory of the pain wouldn't disappear so easily. The only bread they could afford was the hard stuff, and so Siegfried had to maintain constant vigilance or risk undoing her hard work.

Siegfried could sense that the clan recruiters were desperate in their own way—the presence of a mage in a clan's roster could vastly alter the whole clan's standing. Of course, Kaya's own skills were important, but the fact of the matter was that having *any* mage was a draw for clients.

But joining a clan was out of the question. It was only the clan's leader who saw any recognition—even if your standing within a clan rose, it was only the greatest of adventurers who made it into the sagas. Siegfried needed to make it on his own, as part of his own party—no, as their *leader*. It was only the feats of the few most exceptional heroes who were sung of. Four intrepid souls against a fallen god, freshly immortalized in song by Marsheim's most famous poet in “The Defanging of the Serpent-Devil,” the talk of the whole city—that was the dream, the only height worth aspiring to.

If their feat had been achieved by a noble with their own army, or a leader who had the might of the clans behind them, then the only names of note would be the front-runners. The names of those who had perished defending their allies or taken the fall for someone else's aims during the epic battle wouldn't even feature as a footnote.

Over the years, there would surely be many young souls who would vow to become heroes themselves just from this tale alone. Siegfried wanted to become firewood to stoke the blazing hearts of children. Joining a clan wasn't an option.

On top of that, their target was Kaya anyway. It was almost a guarantee that she would be taken away from Siegfried and loaded with a pile of backbreaking requests. As for Siegfried, he would be saddled with all the grunt work, and the time he could have spent working toward becoming a better adventurer would be wasted.

What the hell would fixed lodgings and a gaggle of ragtag adventurers get him?

The hero-hopeful clenched his fist as he reaffirmed his resolve to never let them hold his fate or take Kaya for themselves.

It would be fine if he could just form a party he could trust. He just needed one or two more people that he could leave to watch his back and, if possible, a scout who could survey the road ahead. If he was being honest with his desires, it would be awesome to have one more mage and someone with a miracle or two in their back pocket in the team.

If he could achieve that, then he could fight as Saint Fidelio had in the story he'd heard yesterday. Siegfried would be a bit different from his namesake and most revered hero, the Slayer of the Foul Drake—that Siegfried had fought all his battles with nary a comrade or childhood friend in sight, start to finish—but to even dream of someday doing deeds on the level of the Goddess of Calm Tides's chosen soldier was an ambitious undertaking.

Siegfried ground his cowardice between his teeth as he took his friend's hand and dashed from the Association building.

I'll protect her from their evil invitations. Kaya had long been burdened by her own people-pleasing tendencies. She was a kindhearted girl who had practiced her smiles in the reflection of the local pond, and since she had come along with Siegfried on his quest, he had a responsibility to protect her from any unwanted and distasteful strangers. In return, she would cover for his faults, and together they would take on grand adventures side by side. And, though he dwelled on it less, one day he hoped to put a ring on her finger—nothing fancy, but precious nonetheless.

He didn't want just to protect her—he wanted to *be* with her. He'd promised that much as he dashed out of their canton that night, kicking the dirty sign that read Illfurth on the way out.

“All right, let's do this.”

“Yep, let's give it our all, Dee!”

“C'mon, I said call me Siegfried, dammit!”

Although the pair had some time to carouse, the day's work was simple hard labor. Not only was the storehouse of the wholesaler (a supplier for Marsheim's

local herbalists) unnecessarily large, the shelves were stupidly high (to keep the herbs dry, Siegfried presumed), and the pair had to make countless journeys up and down the ladders.

That night in bed, after giving muscles he hadn't even known he had a brutal workout, Siegfried groaned in pain as he clutched at himself and swallowed down the pain, reasoning that this was foundational work for future sagas that were to be told for generations.

And besides that, there was another small reward to consider. The wholesaler had directly given the pair a new job collecting the wild-grown herbs he couldn't cultivate—a request that usually would only be available to ruby-red level adventurers.

Siegfried's earnest toil and Kaya's plant lore had impressed their client, so despite his aching muscles, Siegfried slept the sleep of the just that night.

[Tips] “To cover oneself in soot” is a provincial Rhinian expression, referring to the act of becoming an adventurer. Although such aspirations are all well and good, many beginner adventurers who lose heart take inspiration from the lowest rank to air their grievances.

A lot of regulars had started asking whether I was going to be adopted, maybe since I'd become a familiar face there. Even though Fidelio and Shymar were madly in love, the two of them didn't have any children. Folks must've thought Fidelio'd fished up a capable son to cement their transition from simply an item to an honest-to-goodness family.

Naturally, they tended to be taken a little aback when I flashed my tag and gave the boilerplate “no, legitimately, we're just coworkers” spiel.

It was no real shock to me, though; the name “Goldilocks” might have carried some weight in certain circles around here, but I was hardly a household brand among the normies. Or perhaps they had taken one look at my small frame and decided that adventuring wasn't the job for me.

What I wouldn't give for another head of height and some homegrown beef on these bones. If things had been going to plan, I would be nearing 180

centimeters tall by the time my long bones were done growing.

It's not that I disliked the idea of being all secretly skinny-ripped, but to be frank I longed for the sturdy frame that my old teacher Lambert had. Now there was a textbook Tough Guy; just looking at him made me feel like anyone would feel safe leaving him watching their six.

Like, come on, tell me you wouldn't find it in you to charge a block of pikemen with nothing but a firm grip on your zweihander if it was him leading you. The magistrate had recruited him personally because he was just that obviously beastly. I'd made myself an absolute fiend for meat and worked my body to the bone in the hopes that I'd come out even a little bit like him, but my results were pretty unremarkable.

To put things in Hollywood terms, I was shooting for a Dwayne Johnson look, but I topped out around Chris Evans, which just didn't cut it if you ask me. Go big or go home, you know?

Ugh, please let me be a reliable frontliner—190 centimeters tall, 120 kilos, and at least an 18 in STR.

“Then why are you pouring EXP into magic proficiency?” I hear you cry, and, well, you might have a point.

“Whatcha thinkin' about? Is it icky?”

I felt a soft sensation on my head—the now long-familiar weight of a sprightly alfish body sprawled amid my locks. Lottie had come out to chat. I supposed she'd been waiting to show herself until the last customer saw themselves out—not that anyone would have seen her if she didn't want them to.

“I was just thinking that I wished I was a little bit taller, and that it'd be pretty damn nice to have a cool scar like that young adventurer I met the other day.”

“You were?! Naw, a scar wouldn't suit you *at all!*”

Lottie's disappointment was palpable in the face of my honest desire.

A scar wouldn't suit me? Hmm, was it possible to swap out some points in APP and put them toward SIZ...?

“Heads up, you got some customers coming. Ooh, they *smell.*”

“How do they smell?”

My query floated in the air just as the door opened and was answered as soon as the customers came in.

“Excuse us.”

They were a mage in a low-hooded cloak and an entourage of two others. One of the henchmen had a nose that veered way off course in a couple directions. Let’s just say that all three were familiar faces.

The lady mage in front was the poor soul whose face Margit had so rudely introduced to the pavement. I assumed she must have gotten fixed up, because she looked pristine—not even a scab left on her.

One of the men behind her was the unfortunate mage who had tried to tear-gas me shortly before I’d open-palm slammed his head into a wall—hence the nose. Clearly he couldn’t afford his boss’s iatruge and just didn’t have the mojo or the skill to do the reconstructive work it would’ve taken to erase the mark of his brutal ass-beating himself. Poor fool might as well have been walking around town with the word *CHUMP* written in tall, friendly letters on his forehead.

The other man was the backliner who had been caught up in said tear gas attack. I suppose it was thanks to the Baldur Clan’s infamy that he had managed to swagger around with his sword so brazenly out in the open without being stopped by the local guard.

“This establishment is for travelers and merchants. If you want a drink, I suggest you take your money elsewhere.”

The master had a firm “no adventurers” policy (exempting his own comrades, naturally), and as I borrowed the saint’s fearsome reputation, the mage in front quickly put her hand in her breast pocket.

My fingers itched for a weapon; I snatched a fork off the counter—with some effort, even a wooden fork could kill—but I pumped the brakes on my instincts as I noticed that none of them seemed to be spoiling for a fight.

For the love of the gods, I thought, you’re a mage—please don’t do anything sudden and suspicious just because you’re not holding your staff. I was moments

away from hucking this at your windpipe.

It was exceedingly common for mages to unleash their magic through potions or charms, and I knew for a fact she knew some Imperial College ornithurgy—let her get off an incantation and she might go airborne, and then things could get really screwy. So, like, it had to be just common sense among mages to refrain from sudden and unexplained movements, right? Because let me tell you, if you're not thinking about how all your wizard nonsense puts people on guard, it's kinda on you if they attack first and ask questions later.

“Good gods, I've just come to deliver a letter!”

She was oddly cautious—well, I suppose that's natural; she *had* been on the brink of death the last time we'd talked like this—and pulled out not a small staff or formula-engraved talisman as I'd expected, but a wax-sealed letter.

The crest of a crow with an eyeball in its mouth belonged to the Baldur Clan's boss, Nanna Baldur Snorrison. It was the symbol of the entire clan, but it was also proof that whatever received the seal was approved by her personally.

However, my experiences with my former employer still lingered in my heart, and the fact that a former Imperial College student would go so far as to affix a wax seal with her crest honestly pissed me off. Was she looking down on me?

She had a long name, but she wasn't a noble—she wasn't even a *magia*—yet here she was, publicly using her crest on a letter. If that didn't reek of arrogance then I didn't know what did.

You didn't hear the palatial tongue out in these parts much. The value system was different here. It would be a waste of time to air my gripes with a mage who was nothing more than a messenger pigeon, so I bit my tongue and decided to take the letter.

In all honesty, I didn't want to be involved with a clan of outlaws; I wanted to take after the black goat in that old nursery rhyme and simply dispose of the thing without even reading it, but I knew that choosing to ignore it would result in more faff down the road, so I put this desire aside.

The fact that the three messengers didn't leave despite my receiving the letter indicated to me that they'd been asked to secure a response before

departing.

Come on, you three—this is an upright inn and restaurant! It's bad for business for three suspicious-looking, no-good adventurers like yourselves to just plant themselves right by the door.

I said I'd call them once I'd read the letter and kicked them aside—metaphorically, of course—then coaxed them out of the way and into some seats while I opened the letter.

The letter'd been enchanted with a self-immolation spell to keep it safe from all but the intended reader's prying eyes. This was a common technique in the School of Daybreak—basic day one etiquette. More powerful forms of this magic would combust the curious reader along with the letter itself. Some would skip right past lethal consequences and go straight to transmutations that would leave the reader praying for death. However, these were a bit too grotesque for daily use, so this was a more reasonable choice.

What would Lady Agrippina do? Well, her techniques were far too complicated for me to completely understand, but I suppose she'd tamper with the fate of anyone other than the intended reader by making them unable to read again. Worst case, she'd slam-dunk them into some eleventh-dimensional garbage bin, forever exiled from the material plane. But that's just me spitballing; the long and short of it is that she'd do something so beyond the pale I don't want to dwell on it.

Forgetting the past for now, since Nanna had made no effort before or since to hide her research chemical habits, I wouldn't have put it past her to send something that would explode into a toxic gas cloud filled with *Bacillus anthracis*, but there was just a normal letter inside.

As I was about to sit down and read the damn thing, I heard a voice from somewhere around neck-height.

"I know they showed up wearing their best tough-customer act, but you could show a little decorum and not telegraph how badly you want to shoot the messenger, couldn't you?"

My partner leaped toward me as usual, having sensed something was amiss from the inner garden.

Chalk up another loss for me. It seemed that Margit hadn't had a lot of time to spend on self-improvement, so she'd been making an effort to invent opportunities to polish her silent movement on me—never mind that it already shone like a jewel. She could already stalk her quarry in the wooded highlands with the best of them, but her urban stealth was only getting better.

The number of times I didn't notice her unless I was concentrating had been on the rise recently; if I wasn't careful our final score would start to tip fully in her favor. My sensory skills as a swordsman were reaching their limit, so maybe it was about time I looked into some kind of twenty-four seven watchdog spell.

"It's a letter from the Baldur Clan. Delivered personally by some of their higher-ups."

"Oh my. It seems they esteem you quite highly! Quite a feat for an adventurer who's just shaken off his soot."

My partner snickered at me as I fought to parse the letter's peculiar handwriting.

"News gets to them quick. It's only been two days since we were promoted."

"They're skilled at this kind of stuff. Their intelligence network within their turf is on a whole other level. Our information networks essentially boil down to the friends we take tea with."

"Let's just be grateful we take tea with heroes immortalized in story and song then, yeah?"

The content of the letter was an innocuous congratulation for our promotion, closing on the surprising suggestion that they hold a feast to celebrate.

Although it wasn't written to spec for basic courtly protocol, the writing was elegant—fitting for a former student of the Institute. All the same, there was something odd about some of the flicks and curves in the letters that seemed sloppy. Poor gal wasn't getting the shakes, was she?

All the same, I couldn't shake the feeling that she was looking down on us. It felt like she still saw us as pawns—just pawns in need of a light and judicious touch.

The whole proposition was in keeping with etiquette, but you couldn't ignore that this was a great big swinging-dick power move, showing off the quality of Baldur's informants. Ever since silencing the Exilrat, everyone aside from Miss Laurentius was walking on eggshells around us, but it seemed that our psychonaut friend had caught the scent of her former life on us and decided we still had some utility to her.

"Right, I'll send a polite letter declining her invite."

"Aw, why not take her up on her offer?"

You serious? I looked at my partner and saw that she had a devilish grin; she followed up with an old huntress's expression: "A beast's easier to butcher when you know where the offal is." In less gruesome terms—no better place to gather the intel you need to control a foe than right in the midst of their operation.

Hmm... Yeah, she had a point. It wouldn't be a completely bad thing to meet face-to-face and get a read on the situation. It beat staying completely in the dark about what Nanna would be doing behind my back.

Of course, I had no intentions of getting buddy-buddy with her, but an adventurer needed ties.

"Fine. We can take her up on her offer, but I'm not eating or drinking a thing, got it?"

"I won't tell you to open your heart to that extent. I only have a passing acquaintance with poison myself, so I won't be partaking either."

All righty then, how's about I get myself a little revenge while I pen my reply?

I could sense no one else nearby, so I snapped my fingers, and with that (plus a little space-bending magic) I opened up our box of equipment.

Inside was a selection of supplies from my former employment that I could instantly summon into my hand as needed. This time called for some parchment made of high-quality sheepskin that a noble wouldn't turn his nose up at upon receiving, a bottle of enchanted ink of an equally high quality, and a gryphon-feather quill that I had used often.

They were all important items, but it was a common pitfall for TRPG newbies to realize “Oh crap, I forgot to buy them!” after penning their early character sheets and beginning a campaign. Once I had prioritized buying potions and ended up without something so basic as paper, so I ended up borrowing a scrap from a fellow PC’s notebook.

You couldn’t afford to be lax just because it was easier to scrounge up such basic items in real life.

Back to the task at hand: I don’t want you looking down on me, failed student-boss lady. I’d worked myself right to the bone for a count; I’d even trained her *future retainers*. You’re not gonna intimidate me with a well-penned letter and noble bombast, no way.

“What nice stationery. How much did it set you back?”

“Charged it to the expense account. My employer didn’t keep her purse strings tight when it came to stuff like this.”

For a textbook bourgeois pig academic turned actual aristocrat, she *really* had no attachment to money. She would buy me the necessities, no matter the cost, and wouldn’t even balk at my requests. Her approval of purchasing this stationery set for me came with the tacit expectation that I maintain at least a minimum of decorum when sending letters.

Whatever the case, the ink and parchment were of high enough quality for a count to send a letter to the Emperor himself. *You better brace yourself...*

I quickly penned my response, then was ready to seal the letter—I didn’t want her to know I could use magic, so I didn’t bother with a spell to ward against nosy interlopers—when I realized something important.

Oh yeah, I don’t have a wax seal...

Letters had always been sent on Lady Agrippina’s behalf, so she had given me her signet ring to affix the seals, and I had simply used glue when sending letters back home—this was a complete oversight.

Aw man, if I don’t cinch this, then I won’t be able to make the exact impression I want to.

“Hey, Margit? You don’t happen to have a signet ring with a cool crest on it, do you?”

“Are you honestly asking if a huntress would put pointless equipment on her fingers? If you want to make one, I can lend you some fangs or something else I put aside.”

Her slender fingers were, just as she said, completely undecorated. Rings would alter how a bow or dagger would feel and handle, so Margit wasn’t a fan. She preferred to cover other parts of her body in jangly jewelry—that she was skilled at keeping silent—in their place, however.

Hmm, yeah, I could make one on the spot. My Woodworking and Dexterity were enough to whip up a pretty top-of-the-line eraser stamp in five minutes or so. Unfortunately, my artistic vision was holding me back. Even if I could copy artwork or writing well on a technical level, I was not an “ideas guy” in either life; it seemed to point to some kind of basic, persistent poverty of my soul.

This was pure conjecture on my part, but I think this was why conceptual skills, which seemed so technical on the surface, ran such a steep XP cost—mess with those and you’d be tinkering with the literal essence of your being. It was similar to how I didn’t really value my facial features or voice—attributes that would change as I grew older—but didn’t want to mess with my height values now that most of my long bone growth was done with.

Who was it that said “You can’t buy class with money”?

“Aha, that’s it.”

I know exactly what to do to surprise her with my “class,” or shall I say my pride...

[Tips] In this age, a house’s honor is more important than matters of blood, so adoption is a common occurrence. The magnanimity to adopt a child of another race should they happen to possess unique talent is a must in the Empire.

However, when it comes to walking examples of the natural history of humanfolk, such as methuselah, the question of their ability to provide

offspring is another key metric by which judgments are made as to whether they fall within the clade. All the same, there are tales of mensch who have sired and spawned children with drakes, so it goes without saying that exceptions are more common than not.

We were invited under the auspices of a celebratory feast, but smoke was the only thing that entered the mouths of all present.

In the base of Clan Baldur—it seemed one step removed from descending into ruins or the site of a haunted house—Margit, the head of Marsheim’s most lawless clan, and I sat together.

In an effort to show that she bore no murderous intent, Nanna’d convinced her bodyguards to sit this meeting out for once.

It was something that I had practiced countless agonizing times working under Lady Agrippina—even being taught increased my proficiency rapidly—and so my letter in court process palatial writing seemed to have quite an effect.

Nanna’s time as an Imperial College student meant that she had received education under the expectation that she was to serve under a noble as their bureaucrat or become a noble herself. I could never forget the sight of poor Elisa being lectured by Lady Agrippina in the correct way to hold a spoon or walk or any of a million other aggravating, arbitrary social signifiers.

Everything that nobles did, from the way they ate soup to how they did their buttons, was annoying as hell to its core.

Mika, for example, spoke to me in a casual and colloquial way, but they were hugely talented in palatial speech. I figure it came down to their master forcing them to drill down on every single excruciating difference in gendered dialect rules so that they wouldn’t slip up.

I knew just how much of a damn chore courtly writing was, even putting aside all my firsthand experience dealing with the convoluted stuff. To put it in more familiar terms, it’s not exhausting in quite the same way as an online job application, but it’s damn close and leaves you begging for death at about the same volume. Though, man, I could write a killer cover letter this time around.

But, hm, yeah, how do you condense work experience like mine into two pages tops, double-spaced?

Forgetting my homesickness for a second, I actually worked one last little vengeful angle just to get completely under her skin.

I had made a perfect facsimile of the wax seal that *she* had used on the letter to me.

The wax seal in itself was a cornerstone in protective seals; they were also imbued with another type of protective seal to prevent the crest's misuse.

Of course, Nanna had enchanted her own eyeball-plucking crow crest to prevent reuse, but little did she know that I had once served a count. I had a whole slew of other shrewd methods up my sleeve.

When I started my work penning letters for the madam, Lady Agrippina had drilled into me that this particular method of misusing someone's seal was all too possible.

Perhaps now she had mistaken me for the sort of guy with an illusionist on call, or who'd pull strings at the Snoozing Kitten to get Miss Zaynab to bail me out.

I think that Nanna now fully understood the two other forms of revenge I had employed in my reply, aside from the actual writing itself. Hopefully now, as I let the untouched food grow cold and the cold cups of booze grow warm at this awkward "celebration," she realized that I was an even more troubling foe—one with connections to her former life.

Never mind a strong foe—it's infinitely trickier to deal with one who knows your past. Especially when they can make use of your current unsavory reputation. Just having that fistful of ominous implications on me kept her at a safe distance. No one wants to pull any big moves against an opponent with a powerful hand and multiple stacks of chips.

Nanna couldn't deny the powerful counterspell I held in the palm of my hand.

Yes, the ace up my sleeve was a connection with not only my former employer, but the biggest name in the School of Daybreak, the pervert supreme, Lady Leizniz herself. Now, what do you think would happen if a little

bird told the lady that a former student of hers had pivoted to slinging junk, hmm?

To be frank, it would probably run a pretty steep cost for me too; not quite mutually assured destruction, but still not a strategy I'd like to fall back on.

I had to hand it to Nanna—she had guts for not canceling on me for another “important matter” after learning of this connection to her old life. She might have fallen, but she'd aspired to become a magus once. Not only this, she hadn't been pushed out of the College for lack of talent or a broken will; no, she had chosen to plow ever onward into the realm of forbidden magic and so had been ousted by the faculty.

I was already used to dealing with people who'd kill me on a whim or in the midst of a tantrum. But it was also important to note that there was a benefit in having such people around.

I internally reappraised Nanna. Here this mage was, taking hit after languorous hit from her water pipe, not eating a bite or drinking a drop herself, completely unfazed by my credentials despite not knowing why I would have them. It was clear that she wasn't just a small fry who had gotten by in Marsheim by grace of magic's rarity.

“But my... It is rather quick...”

The first words in a while since we'd been seated crossed Nanna's lips with a puff of smoke. Appraising one another in silence as the food grew cold was to be expected from those who had experience in the world of nobles, but I'm sure that Margit beside me was feeling incredibly awkward throughout the whole thing. *I'll buy her something nice later for putting up with this, I thought. Maybe some new jewelry.*

“For someone...to be promoted this quickly? There have been...maybe four...in the time...since I became an adventurer.”

“Well, that's hardly out of the ordinary for such a short span.”

“Oh my... You're saying I look young? How delightful... Although I couldn't achieve...immortality or invulnerability...you know.”

It seemed that the borderline-skeletal mage had taken my words as a socially

obligatory compliment. Y'know what I mean: standard "you don't look a day over forty-five" patter.

"It took...forty full moons for me...to be promoted. Well...it happened after...I started dispensing my medicines."

"Medicines?"

"Hee hee... Yes, legal ones...of course."

I usually turned my nose up at hearing my seniors boast of all their achievements while drinks were on the table, but it wouldn't hurt to hear of Nanna's exploits. She wasn't just a senior adventurer; she was a kingpin, standing at the top of a genuine local monopoly.

Not only that, she didn't wish to merely blow her own horn. I was here on her invitation; any information she fed me on her own initiative, she'd chosen to share for a reason. If it was difficult to kill me, then she could at least try to get me to like her. It was a logical move.

Nanna didn't begin her rise to infamy through selling illegal drugs from the get-go. Before she became an adventurer who was a cut above the rest, she had first concocted and sold regular old potions to earn a living. I wondered if she really needed to become an adventurer if she had such a steady gig going, but apparently it was more suitable for her to get her start as an adventurer due to taxes and initial investments and what have you.

Nanna had used her reputation as a mage to fish for requests from herb wholesalers and apothecaries, where she would make pipes and use her connections to obtain cheap ingredients to make her own high-quality potions. She used her earnings to purchase more facilities and materials and increased the scale of her operation. *I...feel like I've done this myself in various other worlds.*

Mimicking the methods used in Cyrodiil or a postapocalyptic Las Vegas, she had pooled together her earnings to create a new potion.

"It was a special concoction...to treat athlete's foot."

Nanna had puffed out her chest to illustrate just how impressive her feat was, but I honestly didn't get it.

“Ohh? You don’t see the importance of it?”

“I’ve, uh, never suffered from it.”

“That’s a surprise.”

I wondered if “athlete’s foot” meant something else here; so I could only cock my head to the side in confusion. By my side, Margit flexed her legs covered in carapace, which were impervious to bacterial contamination. Nanna sighed another plume of smoke.

“Athlete’s foot... It’s what results when adventurers...well, when anyone treks over wet fields... Not only that...it’s an occupational hazard even nobles suffer.”

Nanna explained the condition with complete exasperation, but it seemed that I *had* heard her correctly. It was athlete’s foot just as I knew it—a promulgation of fungus on the foot in suitable conditions when adventurers, merchants, and even nobles wear shoes for too long, and so she had managed to make a killing selling a potion to cure it.

Lower-class people who bought shoes at secondhand stores, received them from others, or even stripped them from corpses rarely ran short of fungal infection vectors. As for nobles, they preferred well-fitting leather shoes, which didn’t exactly breathe well. No Rhinian was exempt, aside from those too impoverished to even buy shoes.

All the same, I didn’t quite get its importance.

Hold on. Maybe it’s because father had been a mercenary. He had given us all a wide selection of shoes and had made sure we rotated them out on a regular basis.

Perhaps he had suffered from athlete’s foot in the past, had learned of the importance of keeping one’s feet clean and aerated as a preventative measure from his fellows, and had drilled this custom into his children. I remember one of my coworkers in my sales job complaining to me in an izakaya that it’s particularly bad in humid summers.

But anyway, I supposed it made sense you could make a mint selling folks an easy remedy for an endemic disease.

“But...there’s a limit...on how much you can do with normal sales.”

“Why? I’m not saying it was as life-changing as a hair-growth potion or a slimming potion, but you must have made quite a profit, no?”

“It pains me to admit...but...if you want to perfect your magic...nowhere is as good as the College.”

Nanna complained that the facilities and tools were all expensive, and attaining them would be a real effort. It was a different kind of exhaustion that had filled her and led her to her narcotics. It was no real surprise to me. It was true that my connections allowed me to use alchemical tools and labs, but it would cost more than a fortune to get facilities with the same supplies for yourself. This was especially true when factoring in the trial period to verify the effects of a new creation on a representative sample. An unimaginable budget would be necessary for that. You would need a still, a mixing machine, a centrifuge, a microscope, many cauldrons, and a vast array of glasswork that you’d churn through on the daily—and that was just what I could come up with off the dome. Then would come the odd jobs like hiring low-rank adventurers to catch the rats and other vermin that the work would inevitably draw.

However, students at the Imperial College got special discounted rates and bespoke equipment, which made the overhead of any project far more manageable. A normal income wouldn’t even be able to buy one test tube sufficient to the needs of someone so devoted to their studies that they’d crossed into the realm of outright heresy.

I assumed that all of her items had been specially ordered or custom-made. These items could be dozens of times more expensive than the stuff the door-to-door merchants sold to the College’s workshops.

This was compounded by the fact that there were very few skilled craftsmen around here who could polish lenses, so the order would have to come from another region—at that point you might as well be buying gems, or, barring that, a damn manor.

Jeez, talk about terrifying. To think of how much money went down the drain just to buy enough magical equipment to match a high school lab in my old world... I can see why all but the most successful researchers are all penniless.

“So all of this is just for the sake of continuing your research?”

“Of course... In the past...I innocently pursued a potion...that would make you healthy just by drinking it...and...that could give everyone an imperishable body, just like methuselah.”

Nanna spoke in a quiet voice—almost incoherent mumbling. She reached her hand out toward the table and picked up a glass of wine that had remained undrunk.

“What color...does this look to you?”

“A deep red. By its fragrance, I imagine it’s a southern wine. Probably a good bottle.”

“Indeed... But is your red...truly the same as my red?” Nanna placed the cup to her smoke-wreathed lips.

Red, like most other colors, was just a specific wavelength of light. My experience of “red,” the perceptual reality, the qualia, was a product of the interplay of my own biological mechanisms for gathering sense-data—my “werkwelt.”

“There was this kid...who started at the College at the same time as me... They were colorblind... You know, that illness...where you can’t differentiate certain colors?”

“I know of it. I heard the most common condition is being unable to differentiate between green and red.”

“Yes, yes... They were a good kid... We were so close... But herbs and potions are identified by their color, aren’t they? So...I wanted to help them. I tried many things...to try and cure that condition. But...then I realized something.”

“And that was?”

“I realized that the world...in the end...it’s nothing but impulses in our nervous system.”

Consciousness, in short, was but a biological process, picking over a werkwelt derived from the broader sensory reality it inhabited—the “umwelt”—to build a private and heavily distorted picture of the body’s circumstances: the

“merkwelt.”

Even in a world where the existence of the soul is common knowledge, the fact that we can only use the specialized holes in our meat suits to observe the world holds fast.

So this was the truth behind the magus-hopeful’s ouster from the College.

“If you drink this...you can recreate the sweetness on your tongue...the tartness...everything can be recreated with magic. Even without a scrap of grape ever entering the picture.”

“Yes, that’s technically possible, but...”

“In other words everything...is perceived from the inside of this flimsy sack of meat... All just a dream.”

Man, this turned super philosophical for a story that was supposed to be about your origins as a gangster.

Even an immortal and imperishable body has afflictions it hungers for relief from.

What would happen if there was a potion that could provide perfect happiness? If someone created a potion that could provide happiness and nothing else for the soul? If you had a potion that, from the first drop until your dying day—no, it would provide a happiness that *death* couldn’t even encroach on—could change every impulse into pleasure?

Nanna’s conclusion was that this would be sufficient for people, and thus followed her fall.

“But, well...the potion as it is...remains incomplete... I mean...I have to wake up from the dream...and I remain chased by the painful desire to *do* things... How dreadful, no?”

Nanna was still in a nightmare. Madness had festered in her empty head and tainted her reasoning. She was pursuing a panacea that would conquer all human feeling, burn away the veil of sense, perception, and thought, and abolish the illusory material world, delivering all souls into sweet oblivion.

She was straight-up an evil mage. If she had been the type to live in a tower

outside of the city, stealing away innocent citizens and experimenting on them, some pack of intrepid souls would surely come bashing down the doors to shut it all down.

I could sympathize with her exhaustion with the world and herself, but I couldn't approve of it one jot.

But people turned a blind eye to what she was doing.

"You see...I want someone...who isn't interested in my failed potions..."

After all, while she was making her illegal drugs, she was keeping Marsheim flush with medicine and potions.

"You know I won't take it sitting down if you ask me to be your guinea pig, right?"

"No, no... First of all, people who can use magic are no good...they're difficult to use..."

Nanna laughed, telling us that in order to achieve her goal of granting happiness to all humankind, she needed to create something that worked on normal people first.

I thought the conversation had sidetracked into spiritualism from business, but she'd looped back quite naturally. I wondered if her conversational cul-de-sacs were just a side effect of her party favor of choice, or if she was just like that. Well, best not to probe.

Madness is contagious. Ideas have the power to proliferate, as evidenced by her clan of avid believers.

All the same, I felt uneasy about actively not broaching the subject. The most terrifying plots were the ones you couldn't see in motion. You can more easily put up with a pain you know is coming. Just like how a battle-worn soldier will scream in pain from jamming his pinky, it's difficult to come up with a stratagem against a plot that came creeping up on you while you're kicking back for the night.

A happy medium was called for...which was easier said than done, really.

"So what do you want from us? Well, I can assure you that you'll get a good

price from two ruby-red adventurers who have just shaken off their soot.”

“Yes, just as I expected...you catch on quickly... Don't worry, you won't need...to get your hands dirty... The job is approved by the local administration.”



I knew this wasn't going to be a simple celebration, but Nanna's request was far simpler than I had envisioned.

The Baldur Clan contributed enough to local society that the shot-callers were willing to turn a blind eye, and among their legal activities was the sale of medical goods, plain and simple. Even if you put aside the endless quarrels in the region, people still got sick and injured in their daily lives. Those cantons with no resident doctors or iatrurges needed a steady influx of medicine from the magistrates to the local village heads. The provision of even basic medicines, like salves, bandages, and palliative infusions, made all the difference. Because of this, people were keen to encourage the flow of goods so that they could stock up in preparation for times of emergency.

Now, the Baldur Clan wasn't particularly bellicose, nor was it composed of fighters who could take a battle head-on, and even among the other clans that worked under their umbrella, there were no people of real martial talent. You might get the occasional berserk tweaker, but this was merely a temporary state your average Setting Sun initiate—someone who'd really put the work into their mind-over-matter act—would laugh off.

Their mage was the backbone of the clan and their most valuable asset. Production would fall hopelessly behind if she left the city willy-nilly, and she'd need bodyguards anyway.

If they were just going to tough it out, then it would be a cheaper and safer option to just employ more people. Just like how the Heilbronn Familie held on to Manfred the Tongue-Splitter as a useful freeloader, Nanna wanted to hire me as personnel for some more rough-and-tumble work guarding caravans running one of her largest shipments of medical goods.

The daily wage was three times higher than the going rate for ruby-red jobs—two librae each per day. Not only that, we didn't have to do the boring parts of keeping watch or chores, and we'd get a stipend for food and drink.

“Why the sudden desire to employ a strong arm?”

“You see...the local powerhouses...they've misbehaved awfully of late.”

Them again? I never heard anything good about them, and this just made my

impression of them even worse.

According to Nanna, some of the local bigwigs and their guards had been using some of her nasal medication, which meant that her operation hadn't suffered too much, but recently there'd been an uptick in incidents. Although medicines were valuable in and of themselves, rumor had spread that Baldur caravans could be moving the less-than-legit stuff too, resulting in armed robberies. The damage had grown severe enough that she had turned to me, someone with whom she had fought with in the past. That was how much the clan's master surprisingly cared about the deceased and injured among her lot.

The city itself was heavily patrolled, but public safety wasn't so tightly enforced in the frontier. This had gotten even worse as of late, and the regions lorded over by the local bigwigs had all but collapsed socially.

To make matters worse, these powerhouses, who should usually bend the knee and ask the government to keep things in line, were putting up illegal checkpoints of their own in order to further pad out their profits.

If this continued, business would stagnate. Even if most of the profits came from Nanna's illegal drugs—they were just a mite pricier than the legal stuff—it wouldn't be good for Nanna's athlete's foot remedies and sleeping drafts to fall short of their noble clientele outside of Marsheim.

All of this had led to Nanna's conclusion that she needed a sword arm to make sure that the delivery would be made no matter what.

"You cut down...a stone lantern in one strike... And that ogre who was...so bored of life...took a shine to you. You can deal with...twenty or thirty bandits...on some provincial warlord's dime, no?"

It didn't seem like she was lying. She was possibly the most cynical person I'd ever met and had a penchant for pretense, but I didn't think that hiding unsavory information was a trait I could add to the list.

This request was from a businesswoman looking to protect her profits.

I asked if I could check the goods; she gave me the all clear. Nanna most likely had pegged my familiarity with potions during our previous encounter; she didn't seem to be planning to trick me into complicity by hiding illegal goods

among the rest of the shipment I was to guard.

“An honest sort, aren’t you... You can bring a few extra hands...in case they choose to hire on more of their own...”

“So I take it they just don’t have the clout to get legitimate support?”

“Exactly... I wouldn’t bare my fangs at the Empire, even for show... If their knights got involved...a few adventurers or mercenaries wouldn’t do any good...”

Yeah, there were few adventurers crazy enough that they would risk their lives for a day’s wage of fifty assarii. One’s own life was more important than fighting off a trained soldier. You can’t do anything if you’re dead, so it made sense to run from a fight you couldn’t win. There were those who put themselves into the heat of it for valor, but they were an obvious minority.

An adventurer with their own knowledge of the trade who could act on their own was far more desirable.

Fine, I thought, maybe I should open my heart just this once, if only to improve my job prospects.

“All right, I’ll help you out. I wanted to get some experience with some gigs outside the city anyway.”

Bodyguard jobs were an adventurer’s bread and butter. It would benefit me to become adjusted to it sooner rather than later, ideally with a client I had a read on.

Should the results of this request go awry, I was fully ready to go full *Shadowrun* and send a letter to Berylin for the betterment of Marsheim. There was nothing wrong with wanting to keep a clean house, after all.

“Why thank you... You newbies nowadays...you’re all so full of life...”

“Have you given this spiel to anyone else?”

“Of course... The younger they are...the more they seek to learn. There’s...a mage girl... She knows her potions...so I thought to ask her...”

“Tell me more.”

“What...?”

She seemed shocked to see me suddenly leaning in, and let slip that the mage girl she'd mentioned was one and the same as my cute fellow adventurer that I met the other day's partner.

Kaya of Illfurth, if I remembered correctly.

No. This wasn't good. I couldn't let my fellow Level 1 adventurers be led down a path of evil.

“Can you withdraw your offer to her?”

“Huh? Why? She...a friend?”

“Something like that.”

I liked that kid—Siegfried, or whatever his name had been before. He hadn't shouted about how I didn't deserve to be doing well—just announced that he would overtake me.

He was a hot-blooded youth, full of healthy vigor. It was refreshing to see, considering my own cumulative age, and I couldn't help but look down at him with affection. I hadn't managed to take on the same kind of traditional by-the-book roles as he had, but it really lit a fire under me to see such a suitable friend play the part of hot-blooded pregenerated youth.

I had started to feel something was lacking in my life. I had irreplaceable friends, the cutest little sister in the entire world, and a partner by my side who I could trust to protect me while I slept. All the same, I didn't have a friend, or should I say a rival, pursuing the same path with the exact same ambition as me.

The only real “partners” I'd had in this regard had been one-shot bosses. I suppose Miss Nakeisha, who I'd crossed blades with many times now, was the closest I had, but our battles had overwhelmingly been about buying time or eventually fleeing, not winning. She wasn't really the kind of rival that I envisioned.

It would be incredibly fun to have a friend of my own age to train with as a fellow adventurer.

I wanted to get to know him.

“Hey, Margit... I know this would be fun with just the two of us, but...”

“Yes, it won’t be long until we can widen our nets. I did go on joint hunting missions back home, so I don’t mind really.”

I had nothing in my heart apart from endless gratitude for my partner for agreeing to my selfish demands. I’d said I wanted us to enjoy ourselves on the battlefield, just the two of us, after all.

“Nanna, this request is something you’ll need doing every now and then, yes?”

“Yes... If you could...it would be very helpful... You won’t have to go to the farthest reaches... I suppose there might be times...where you’re on the road for twenty days... How does that sound?”

“Great, then I’d like to invite some fellow new adventurers with me. You don’t mind, do you? I think more people will be safer for everyone.”

Plus, you know, it just feels right for our first mission where we get to know other Level 1 adventurers to be one where we protect some caravans.

[Tips] Nanna Baldur Snorrison was born in northern Rhine and was once a student of the School of Daybreak in the Leizniz cadre. The reason for her expulsion stemmed from her scorn for base reality and her pursuit of taboo spiritual affairs. She spurned her teacher’s warnings and eventually fell into despair from her research into the depths of the soul.

The societal effects of the drugs she produces have led to accusations that she has a hand in countless deaths, but due to the power her organization holds, she has remained untouched.

Late Autumn of the Sixteenth Year

Named Enemies

In the same fashion that monsters generally differ from region to region, certain regions have their own unique brand of powerful foes. Their strength isn't the only thing of note—sometimes they have a fixed backstory and their own unique histories.

These foes trend two or three times stronger than their unnamed equivalents; every power-hungry munchkin dreams of felling such a remarkable foe.

From a cursory glance, the only real requirement for ruby-red jobs, relative to soot-black, was that they required a bit more trust from you.

We went home from Nanna's feast with growling stomachs; as there was some time before our mission began, I decided to take on a few more gigs.

With our shiny new rank, there were all manner of new hats for me to wear: delivery boy around the city, courier for personal letters, handyman for home repairs, and other odd jobs. There was even a posting from a merchant in need of an assistant he could trust not to come down with a sudden bout of sticky fingers.

Actual bodyguard jobs—not falsely advertised, trumped-up dishwashing or cleaning gigs—were also on the table now. That being said, it wasn't as if adventurers at our level would be stationed at the most prestigious establishments around the city. The majority were from canteens, inns, taverns—the sorts of places that adventurers or mercenaries would frequent. Simply put, where fights were likely and brute force required to quell them, there you could find a couple of ruby-red bouncers looking to earn their keep. The most important requirement was to have a commanding presence—the kind of aura that ends a fight before it starts—so it was similar to those old men you see on

guard duty back in my old world. A day's labor didn't amount to a single assarius, so I wasn't quite sold, to be honest. Not that it mattered; in case you were wondering, they screened me out of the applicant pool pretty quickly. I just wasn't an intimidating guy at first glance.

It was really kind of annoying that my achievements in Marsheim so far had been in good faith, shall we say, and no one really knew about the whole grim 'n gritty cloak-and-dagger plot that played out after my show of grandeur against a clan.

Back to the issue of bodyguards—most businesses didn't directly hire their own guards because they wanted to be able to let them go without any effort should anything undesired occur. In other words, the Association was a dispatch agency of day workers. With the Association handling short-term personnel assignments, businesses wouldn't have to worry about old-timers who had started to quibble over any old thing or full-time employees bargaining for higher wages.

Finally, one of the biggest changes that came with ruby-red was being able to take on jobs guarding caravans. Yes, as Nanna's subordinates busied themselves loading the caravans nearby, we were finally just about to set off.

"I, uh, look forward to working with you..."

"And us you. I'll protect this cargo to the best of my ability."

The head of the caravan was a mage I'd since crossed paths with several times, though her incredibly stilted bearing spoke to how reticent she'd been with me. The one scrap of personal information I had on her was her name: Uzu.

It was an unfamiliar name; I supposed she must have come from the northern reaches like Nanna. Most likely she had bad memories of her old home. That or she had been targeted for some reason and wanted to keep any details that could point back to her roots under wraps. At any rate, I decided not to probe into the matter.

Uzu was to direct the parade for Nanna, so I figured it would be gentlemanly not to trouble the waters.

“The boss has told me to treat you with proper etiquette, so please let me know should you need anything.”

“Thank you kindly for your concern. I’ll make sure to fend for myself regardless, unless things get truly dire. So please rest easy.”

I patted Schutzwolfe as if to say, “You can trust me and my blade,” but she flinched with a small squeak.

Don’t jump out of your skin at the tiniest thing! Had she forgotten it was Margit who’d sent her crashing into the cold, hard ground that day, not me? Her nose hadn’t even been that damaged, *and* Nanna had fixed it up for her.

Our group numbered eight carriages, twenty or so merchants, and nineteen bodyguards—a lot to juggle, even without me keeping her on tenterhooks. To be honest, I was pretty surprised to see her when I turned up. I’d thought Nanna had employed me so that she didn’t have to send her key staff out of Marsheim. But as I talked to Uzu, I found out that despite her skill set, her job chiefly involved running about making sales or delivering messages. Her mana wasn’t suited for concocting potions, and so she had been given a role that better suited her talents.

That was no surprise—her ability to fly was quite something. If she had been my subordinate, I would probably use her in a similar way. Her ornithurgy—rare even among the College brainiacs—meant that she was far more suited to jobs where she could stretch her legs, so to speak, rather than spend her whole day cooped up and hunched over an alembic.

Furthermore, if our entire caravan was annihilated, she would be able to fly back alone and give a report. Her assignment here was a sound decision.

“Th-That sword c-cut down the stone lantern, yet I d-don’t sense any mana from it... Oh, b-boss, I’m scared...”

I’ll...choose to ignore her parting, muttered words. It looked like the sobriquet that the Heilbronn Familie had laid on me had sent her knees aquiver.

“Holy crap, look at that horse!”

The hysterical exclamation came as soon as I hopped onto Castor. I’d be bringing the Dioscuri along this time—not as packhorses, I should be clear.

“Hey, Siegfried. Glad to see you could make it!”

Siegfried was busy picking his jaw up off the floor. He was dressed in...not quite *armor*, but a leather chest plate, and carrying a light load of travel gear, a sword, and a spear.

He had jumped at the chance to accept my request for his team to join the mission. The request hadn't asked for grunt work, came with food included, was at standard ruby-red rates of fifty assarii a day, and tolls would be paid by the client. Siegfried was still soot-black (obviously I hadn't asked Nanna to pay him and Kaya as much as Margit and me), so this kind of job was anything but common. It was quite the sight seeing him nod his head so vigorously in agreement.

An invitation from a rival though it might have been, fifty assarii per day bore quite the allure for a poor adventurer. It was the sort of money that came with the rank above his own and even pared away those extra costs that hit you like a left hook during a job.

By the time we returned safely, he would be ten librae richer—an amount that would substantially bolster his everyday situation.

“You even have a set of matching armor, you bastard! A-Are you a noble or some shit?”

“I'm a simple commoner—no noble brand anywhere on me.”

I decided to be patient with my new friend as his surprise overtook what limited tact he knew how to exercise.

I told him that I was born into a farming family and had no shame surrounding that, with written proof if he wanted to see. Certain circumstances had led me to serve a noble, and these old warhorses had been a present from her when I came to the end of my tenure.

What are you looking at? Did I lie?

I was nothing more than Erich of Konigstuhl, son of Johannes—a simple glory-seeking adventurer.

“I spent my childhood saving up my money to buy this armor. My sword is an

old blade of my father's."

"Y-Yeah, but your kit's pretty damn decent... That ain't the kinda crap a kid can buy with his pocket money..."

"I was good with my hands. I made figurines and the like and sold them."

I patted my beloved horse—who was in a foul mood, since I'd just dismounted him to talk to Siegfried only moments after boarding him—and brought him to Siegfried. I decided it would be rude to talk down to my potential friend.

"This one is Castor. The other one is Polydeukes. We look forward to working with you."

"Oh gods... They're massive...and so damn cool... They're way bigger than the horse that pulled the plow back home... Twice its size, maybe...?"

Siegfried's partner bowed to me from a little behind him as Siegfried ogled the Dioscuri with a young boy's glee.

"I'm sorry about Dee; we haven't even introduced ourselves properly."

"It's totally fine. Any man would be happy to see someone so taken with his horses that they forgot to say hello."

Kaya's apology spoke to her formal education and etiquette training. I responded in kind while noting the difference in this pair's social standing. Siegfried had referred to mine and Margit's palatial speech as "metropolitan speak," but whatever they taught in the private schools out here in the peripheries didn't seem all too different.

"If you'd like, I can show you the ropes on how to ride."

"You serious?! You're not joking, are you? Me? Learn to ride?!"

Was horsemanship reserved for the upper classes around here? Heaven only knew how the local rules varied. Everywhere I'd been, I'd never personally caught flak for acting above my station for riding my horses.

"It's hardly like we're playing at honor guard around here; I'm sure there will be time to teach you."

There was no better foundation for a friendship than this kind of collaboration. I understood a boy's impulse to dream of a cavalier's life all too well. I felt a bit bad for Holter back home, but when I first rode upon these incredible, battle-bred Dioscuri, the difference was palpable enough to fill me with amazement.

I double-checked with the horses themselves; they both let out a short whinny, as if to say, "If we must."

They had made accommodations for Mika when they were still unused to riding, so I was sure that they would kindly help a new rider learn. It would be for the best if Siegfried got the hang of it, just in case unforeseen circumstances reared their ugly heads. The more of us were equipped to run a message back home if someone needed to stay behind, the better off we were.

In fact, it had played out just so around the table once. Our team of explorers had crawled out of a certain mansion of terror and had whooped for joy upon finding a getaway car. Our jubilation was replaced by desperation as someone said, "Hold on, everyone's Driving stats are at their default values, aren't they?"

We ended up tasking the PC with the best odds of success, but alas, the dice gods handed down a fumble to us mere mortals. Our car careened off a cliff, resulting in all of our deaths. Our subsequent rage at our GM for not marking recommended skills on our preliminary handouts and their response that it was common sense for at least *one* person to be able to drive turned it from a painful memory into a really precious one.

"Oh yeah, one word of warning."

"Huh? Does he bite?"

"You? Nah. Just behave yourself."

Siegfried had taken a step back in fear. My Dioscuri would only bother taking their frustrations out on a *truly* discourteous rider. I wondered if Siegfried had some past horse-induced trauma.

I went on to advise him that his hips and waist would get absolutely exhausted until he got used to riding, and that the friction on your behind was enough to peel the skin. As the blood drained from Siegfried's face, I held out

my hand toward him.

“I know this is a bit late coming, but I look forward to working with you two.”

“Y-Yeah, me too...”

Siegfried’s expression suggested that he thought maybe I wasn’t as bad a guy as he thought. I shook his hand, then pulled him along to introduce him to the rest of the caravan.

[Tips] Equestrianism does not boil down to the simple act of sitting astride a horse. Once a horse gets running at high speeds, it is vital to move in sync with the horse’s own movements. If not, the saddle can end up striking one’s behind and can even cause injury.

The name “Goldilocks Erich” was starting to accrue real renown in the adventuring community, but to Siegfried he remained a complete enigma.

Siegfried had heard rumors of his bravery, yet for some reason they were always vague and short on hard facts—he’d done “*something*,” or someone had tried to argue with him and had gotten beaten up.

Unfortunately, Siegfried had no connections who could look into the details of these rumors, but more importantly the offender in each case was always too shamefaced to go into detail.

There was a young man from the Heilbronn Familie who had been violent to a waitress; a single glare from Goldilocks had sent him running, the whole affair leaving a black mark on the clan’s reputation. Any rumors that dared to spread were quashed in an instant, and so the witnesses would always skirt around the topic.

Such watered-down rumors wouldn’t reach a lowly soot-black adventurer with no information network of their own, and so Goldilocks, who hadn’t yet made many connections with his fellow newbie adventurers—although it was possible he was already busy with a clan—held a position of vast mystique among the other rookies.

This enigmatic impression only got stronger throughout the day.

“Horses don’t just move up and down—they have a tendency to swing left and right as much as forward and back. Keep your core in mind and move your body in tune with the horse’s own movements.”

“Ngh, this is impossible! And a long way down, dammit! And it sh-shakes! Ow!”

Siegfried had swallowed down his fear and had decided to get on the horse, but his inexperience in the saddle led him to bite his tongue mid complaint.

“Yeah, I wouldn’t advise talking too much while you’re still learning the basics.”

Siegfried still couldn’t get used to Goldilocks’s metropolitan dialect, and despite their proximity, the mysteries surrounding him remained as unsolved as ever.

Goldilocks had said he was the fourth son of a farming family, but his gear was way too fancy. He had a sword with a specially made scabbard, leather armor with a top-of-the-line breastplate, and on top of that, he had this incredible pair of horses. Even the child of a landed farmer or a landowner wouldn’t be able to get a hold of this kind of stuff. This was especially true if you were like Siegfried—the fourth son of a poor family with no chance of inheritance who only knew the ways of his canton.

Here they were, Siegfried on Polydeukes and Goldilocks on Castor, reins in hand, riding alongside the caravans far faster than a riding lesson’s proper pace. To Siegfried, who had a little experience training with the Watch, Erich—Erich of the flowing golden tresses—didn’t even look like the same kind of creature as him. He looked like something different altogether, a higher being who had donned human form and was merely playing the part...

Yet Siegfried couldn’t afford to let someone surpass him at his own dreams of heroism.

A hero was supposed to possess qualities far greater than a mere mortal, even if the first few inches of surface looked the same. Siegfried had already once encountered a being who had given off the same air: Saint Fidelio.

Siegfried had gone to rifle through the available jobs at the Adventurer’s

Association when he saw the saint, visiting to sort some forms or the like out; it felt as if he had been struck by lightning. Fidelio had headed into the meeting room in the back, so Siegfried didn't even get a chance to exchange a single word, but he would never forget the man's startling impression.

His great stature, his astounding barrel chest, his quiet but commanding demeanor—everything spoke of his sensibility as a warrior. It stood in gestalt as a wordless warning not to start picking a fight you wouldn't win. Siegfried had no idea how anyone could talk to him normally, let alone nip at his heels.

In a similar vein, even though Goldilocks was younger than Fidelio was now, squaring off with him seemed like a complete absurdity. Who could be so foolish as to enrage him into violence? Siegfried would rather make like the more foolhardy of his peers back home and pick a tree from which to play chicken with the ground than risk angering him.

Goldilocks lay far beyond the domain of humankind. Siegfried had managed to shout at him, but picking a fight? No way. He'd had to wait until he had simply bumped into Goldilocks, and even then hadn't even been able to pull the courage together to ask to shake his hand.

Siegfried had told Goldilocks that day that he would surpass him and become a living legend, but how could it not ring hollow when every muscle in his body froze in his presence at the sense of a divine will that hung about him?

Whatever the case, his fellow adventurer's honed skills and innate talent were evident. This boy in the same phase of life, holding his reins as he taught him how to control his horse, was *not normal*.

Siegfried had good reason for plucking up his courage to accept the request; his circumstances meant he couldn't refuse.

He was stone broke, and only getting more so.

Even if he and Kaya could take on jobs that were slightly better than the usual soot-black fare, the money was never enough. Siegfried had made contrivances to rent a small corner of a group dorm and skimmed on baths to reduce his daily expenses, but he couldn't ask that of Kaya.

It was completely out of the question to let a young mage in the prime of her

youth sleep unprotected in the dorm of the Golden Deer among hooligans and rowdy folk.

Siegfried had put aside a portion of his earnings to put Kaya up in the cheapest private room, but even with a slightly better income than average, it wasn't enough to put away any savings.

Unfortunately, the two young adventurers hadn't yet realized that the herbs they would have to make a little journey to collect fetched a higher price in town.

Kaya was a mage, but high-pressure staff-and-formulae casting wasn't her strong suit. On the other hand, she was blessed with a talent for potions; her results were far more powerful than those of her peers with the same reagents and training. The one snag was that she didn't have a catalyst—a key item in concocting potions.

Even the drafts that Kaya had concocted for Siegfried to help him overcome the daily exhaustion from physical labor contained an array of ingredients that were easy to obtain in the countryside—e.g., unparasitized horse chestnuts and dried chamomile (roots and all)—however, these were off the market in Marsheim unless you requested someone fetch them.

Kaya needed a potent and specialized catalyst to make the potions and salves that would heal the inevitable wear and tear of their first real adventure. However, catalysts were *extremely* specific—lake water that had been blessed by direct moonlight for nights on end, for example—and so the simple act of preparing one turned into a colossal money sink.

When Goldilocks's offer came, Siegfried leaped at the chance.

He was sick of ending every night fighting for sleep in a dorm with his cloak for a blanket. He was tired of forcing his partner, who was kind enough to offer to join him in the dorm, to continue sleeping in a cramped, moldy, barely clean bed—full of fleas and lice, although she had tried to sort them out—any longer.

This would lay the foundations for Siegfried's own heroic tale—he didn't so much as hesitate.

After all, he knew nothing of Goldilocks; a chance to talk to him was

inestimably valuable. To become a hero, he would one day have to fell embodiments of evil, beyond the reach of negotiation. It was pathetic for him to be scared of this comrade who had been nothing but kind to him.

Siegfried was going to become a hero. He wouldn't let this break him; if it did it would reduce him to a muttering, reclusive boozehound for the rest of his days. He ignored the pain in his backside and forced himself to learn how to control this horse.

Polydeukes was a kind horse; he controlled his gallop to keep the strain on his untested passenger light. However, the time would eventually come when the rider would need to be able to handle a horse running at full pelt, just like Goldilocks had demonstrated earlier.

After all, horsemanship was essential to chivalry. Siegfried, Slayer of the Foul Drake, had his beloved horse Grani, the Sainly Attendant Ruprecht had his flying reindeer, the impossible half-blood methuselah Hagen had his chariot—in all of Siegfried's beloved sagas, the hero had a loyal steed to ferry them into legend.

As evidenced by members of the Watch who came back from the Eastern Conquest with medals—grating as their boasts were to Siegfried's ears—who praised the Dragon Rider's own brave and reliable steed, Durindana, it was clear that folk still expected a famous steed to go along with the famous rider.

Siegfried fantasized of the day when he would have one of his own, not something borrowed from another...all the while gritting his teeth at the pain from the thrashing his tailbone was taking from the horse's chaotic gait.

"Erich, I've got something to talk to you about."

"Huh?!"

They were galloping at a speed no person could keep up with, yet a familiar voice suddenly spoke up from over near Goldilocks's horse.

There was no way that the voice of Goldilocks's disagreeable partner, the ever-youthful arachne girl, could have just *shown up* in the middle of the conversation. Well, unless she was so close that her voice wouldn't be muffled by the pounding of the horses' hooves.

And yet, there she was.

When the hell did she get there?! Siegfried's jaw dropped—there she was on Goldilocks's back like a knapsack, as usual.

Ignoring Siegfried, Margit whispered into Goldilocks's ear; he let out a tut that was completely at odds with his usual graceful air as he redirected his horse.

"Whoa, what's going on?!"

"Just keep your grip on the reins. He's a smart horse, so you won't need to remind him to follow the caravan. I need to go off and check a little something."

"I don't get what you're saying!"

"I asked Margit to scout up ahead and she saw what looks to be a checkpoint."

"A checkpoint? But we only just left Marsheim! There shouldn't be one yet!"

"I trust everything my partner sees. And we knew ahead of time that they'd been putting up more without Imperial approval lately."

Siegfried could do nothing but watch his fellow adventurer pull himself into a strange raised position as he galloped off. Most likely he had gone off to give a report to the mage leading the caravans and then scout ahead himself to find a way around.

He's getting ahead of me again. A scout was their caravan's first line of defense. This wasn't something you could assign to an adventurer who had applied on a whim. No, this was something to ask of a trustworthy adventurer—an amber-orange at least—or a career caravan guard.

"Well, bring it on..."

Unlike Siegfried, whose ungainly riding hurt his backside, the sublime movements of horse and Goldilocks as one seemed to say *Try and follow me.*

The young adventurer wouldn't just catch up; he'd overtake him. The name Siegfried of Illfurth would become synonymous with the word "adventurer" not only in Marsheim, but all over Ende Erde.

"I'll outstrip you and leave you in my dust..."

No one but the horse between his legs heard the young adventurer's muttering as he watched his peculiar comrade ride away.

But Polydeukes *had* heard him loud and clear.

In a few seconds the horse would rocket off, as if to say, *Hey, I was looking forward to picking up the pace!* as his poor newbie rider clung on for dear life.

[Tips] Most adventurers have a mount of some sort. Less scrupulous dealers in horses are sure to trot out hackneyed legendary pedigrees for their merchandise. Such unverifiable claims are a poor basis for comparison shopping; a wise buyer knows to judge a horse on its own merits.

From atop a hill a ways from the main road, I peered through my spyglass to see a shabbily built shack not far off.

It was no ordinary shack, mind you. Judging by the crew of unsavory types and the horses nearby, my guess was that this was the site of the local strongmen's latest shakedown operation.

Imperial checkpoints were placed between various regions and administrative states and chiefly functioned as a way to collect customs taxes, mitigate epidemics, and uphold public safety. Tolls were taken, but they were never too expensive, as fees for customs and circulation of goods were extremely cheap; care was taken so as not to discourage the steady flow of coin.

Adventurers traveling on the job received discounted fees at checkpoints within the jurisdiction of their Adventurer's Association. The costs were usually paid for with the clients' fees as managed by the Association, so simply passing through never risked breaking the bank.

However, this particular scrupily built blockade over the road was *not* a checkpoint of the make seen anywhere in the Trialist Empire. This was something made without permission by someone who held sway over power in the region—in Earthly terms a local lord, a caudillo, a yeoman samurai, or, if you wanted to keep things simple, a fief-holding, rent-seeking, underregulated, overweening, dyed-in-the-wool sonuvabitch *landlord*.

If this was an officially sanctioned checkpoint, then it would be a watch station to keep the peace and ward off suspicious types from the towns. Patrolling guards would use it as a base or a rest stop. I had never heard of a checkpoint being placed so close to a town before.

In short, it was the opposite of what was good and proper—an illicit facility conceived and staffed by hoodlums to scam people out of their toll money or to seize a caravan's "illegal cargo" through civil forfeiture on shaky grounds.

Now, where the hand of the government was present, such methods would never fly, but we found ourselves quite literally at the ends of the earth. The margraves didn't have power over everything, so it was impossible to fully stamp out the upstarts behind these petty crimes.

Ah well; the fact that clans (who, let's be honest, were just another mob in their own right) brazenly committed misdeeds quite literally on the margrave's doorstep probably told you enough about the state of affairs around here. Should the margrave tighten the reins a bit too tightly, it was more than likely that they would come together in act of defiance, so I suppose the peacekeepers tactfully turned a blind eye toward more minor inconveniences.

All the same, it was a bit much that they were doing this a stone's throw from the city, and I wondered if Margrave Marsheim was being particularly negligent here. *It's us hardworking folk who've got to deal with them, so come on, tighten the reins just a little more, will you?*

"What d'you wanna do about it?" I said.

"It's quite the bother, isn't it?"

Margit had struck off quite a distance ahead of the caravan to verify the safety of the route, and so I had come with her to see what she'd found for myself. I trusted her implicitly; I wasn't here to double-check her work, but to gauge whether this was something I could deal with solo.

"Three horses. And they're not underfed either."

"Yes, when I scouted earlier I saw at least fifteen people. I saw a few others in the periphery; I think they're the advance guard, to make sure nobody tries to skip past the checkpoint."

“And they are...?”

“Knocked out and tied up.”

Nice one, Margit. I knew you wouldn't leave me any loose ends.

As a taxpayer, I would have preferred it if the local administration had put the work in to sort out people like this instead of leaving it to adventurers to put them in their place, but I supposed it was natural for them to have a more medieval approach in terms of politics and morals. Not only that, I imagined they had more than enough on their plates handling hostile foreign relations right across the border. Who knew; maybe acknowledging the problem at the state level would make you look like an easy target to the neighbors. Considering all the difficulties that cropped up in every direction, it was probably impossible to constantly maintain widespread safety.

I started to understand the reasoning behind all the rumors about the Baden family's predisposition toward going gray or outright bald too early.

“They're well armed too. I see pikes, bows... They're all fully armored too. Someone's private army, maybe?”

“It's not about numbers, you know.”

“Yeah, but...”

“Not worth the effort, huh.”

We could drive off the enemy with the sort of assault that you'd see in the chronicles of the Genpei War, but it was worth remembering that some of these types did wield sizable power. They had wealth and influence that no mere adventurer could hope to compare to; in all honesty there was nothing to be gained from making enemies among their number.

In the worst-case scenario, they could nail us with bounties for some invented infraction, putting us at odds with our own fellow adventurers.

I could call in a certain busy noble in the Imperial capital—she had contacted me to say that she was bored and hoping I'd hand over a rare book before too long—but that would be a bit overkill. It was best to simply take the pacifist route and avoid them.

Although the Baldur Clan did have ties with certain local strongmen, it wouldn't be good for those not in the know to pick a fight with us. If there was little to gain from our labor, then it would just be a pain to deal with a mob who was standing right in the middle of the road waiting for people to be caught.

Caravans didn't have to deliver their goods on fixed delivery days like postal services in my old world, so the smart thing to do at this point was play things the adventurer way: slow, cautious to the point of paranoia, undetected, and with an iron grip on our purse strings. We could take some small comfort in the likelihood that this particular brand of human garbage was probably keeping the even more unsavory types at bay.

I didn't want to fall right into their trap and lose all of our cargo, so I swallowed my white-hot rage at the vagaries of late feudalism and made other arrangements.

"Let's take the long way round. Margit, would you mind finding a way through that I could propose to the caravan?"

"Of course; leave it to me, Erich. There is one thing, though..."

We were riding together, and upon hearing the joy in Margit's tone, I looked down to see her with that expression that said *You are incorrigible*.



“You seem to be having fun despite our trouble, aren’t you?”

“You think?”

“I do. You’re always like this, you know.”

Margit leaped from the saddle with all the levity of her words and smiled at me.

“The harder the road, the more fun you seem to have.”

I felt a sudden burst of anxiety. “Sorry... You didn’t find it disagreeable, did you?”

Her smile simply grew wider as she replied. “Not at all. I was merely remarking on how entirely like yourself you’re being.”

My partner disappeared off onto her scouting mission, humming all the while, and all I could do was watch in complete bewilderment. There was nothing in the world like having a childhood friend who understood you.

[Tips] The local powerhouses are citizens who possess influence and power within their local area. In Marsheim they serve magistrates and knights, but their authority is founded solely on brute force, entrenchment, and charisma. It is rare for any of them to wield influence or sway beyond the scope of their reputation. Struggles for power continue in the shadows between this class of de facto petty rulers and the titled aristocracy.

Once the checkpoint was safely behind us, we arrived at our destination with no further complaints. I was happy with how smoothly the journey had gone, of course, but that familiar anxiety set in as I wondered whether that only meant this world’s GM still had something a little spicy in store for us.

The first stop on our itinerary was a developing canton about a month’s journey from the border.

The Empire had begun a recruitment drive for those seeking a new life to start new cantons in out-of-the-way spots like this and reap nature’s bounty at the land’s fringes. It was a quiet place with only a few buildings and no crops just

yet—the fields were still being prepped.

However, the ulterior political motive for building a canton from scratch a little ways from the main road was clear to me.

Advice from my seniors and my own lived experience told me that almost every local strongman was used to throwing their weight around without consequence. The Empire had propped up all these new centers of activity to spread the power-drunk bastards' efforts thin and keep their attention away from larger targets.

Second-born sons and onward didn't have the best prospects in this world, as I knew very well myself, and with little chance to inherit their family's home, they were encouraged to start a new life with their own property in this noble-funded new canton. It was true that the land was owned by rich farmers with dollar signs in their eyes as they dreamed of the long-term profits tenant farming would bring, but that didn't mean that the new communities were all simple manservants. They had respectable manpower to begin with, and their number could be bulked up by the Watch in times of need.

More numbers equaled more power, yes, but it only counted if you could mobilize those numbers quickly. We were out in the sticks here, and so the long march to those rural areas in need would leave the poor villagers thrashing in the water until they arrived. I imagine this had been taken into consideration, and so this community of makeshift soldiers had most likely been gathered out of necessity rather than from their own individual dreams of making it big.

The nobles that had funded this canton must have had quite a sizable sum in their coffers, given that they'd bought medical goods from the Baldur Clan well before any of it was called for.

Throughout fall and into winter, the injured and sick were a common sight on a farm. It was easy to get sloppy and have an accident when everyone pushed themselves from sunup to sundown, and sickness spread in the cooler days as winter crept in. Steep as the investment might have been, I had to hand it to whichever magistrate thought to make preparations this early; wait to order any of this stuff until you really *needed* it and you'd be too late.

Don't get me wrong, I wasn't calling the magistrate *kind*. He was most likely

keeping his makeshift army well taken care of in case the powerhouse next door got a bit too big for his britches.

“Hey. Are we really good to not bother helping unload?”

“Yeah. Leave the heavy work to the people who live here. Our job is to stand by with our weapons at the ready.”

Siegfried, who was standing awkwardly by my side, had bemoaned my default metropolitan diction, so I toned it down a bit.

Memories of backbreaking peasant life back home must have still flowed through his veins, because standing still while people busied themselves around him made him visibly uncomfortable.

Mm-hmm, been there, buddy. When I was working with Lady Agrippina, I’d felt bad for the underpaid lot who had to haul all the cargo, but decorum always forced me to bite my tongue.

Our job today was simply to make sure that the goods delivered by the caravan were safely delivered while always ready to act if the situation required.

“Other clients might request we help as part of our wages, yes, but for *this* gig something else is being expected of us.”

“Which is?”

“This, for example... Hey, you!”

To set a good example for my troubled comrade, I glared at one of the farmers as I shouted at him. He flinched at the sound of my voice. The local lord had ordered them to help with unloading, but no one said that they needed to open any of our stock.

“Hands off the lid! Unless you want to be branded a thief!”

“I-I’m sorry, sir! I was simply...”

“Watch how you hold yourself, that’s all!”

The man who had been reaching for the box of infusions—medicines to take during the onset of a cold—apologized before carrying it off to the storehouse

with tottering steps.

“You never know what sort of underhanded person is going to swipe some of the goods as ‘compensation’ for helping to carry it. Part of the job is making sure that this is understood among everyone present.”

“G-Gotcha...”

To be frank, I didn’t get a bad vibe from that farmer; I bet he just wanted to check what was inside. However, the contents of a delivery were not something a farmer needed to worry himself with—that was a job for the lord or a house servant to do later. All the same, making my intent clear early on would snuff out any rebellious spark in the rest of the people present, so he got to be my unfortunate target for today.

It was human nature, really. Everyone wanted to have *just one* free dose of medicine on the off chance someone in their family fell ill.

“Not only that, the job has gone through the proper channels with the Association, meaning that everyone has been paid already. If the caravan were to make some extra sales at a canton we’d only stopped at to pick up supplies, then the later clients who would get less stock for the same coin would start to complain. And then...”

“We wouldn’t be able to cover our backsides if it was someone savvy making the complaints.”

“Exactly.”

A bodyguard’s job was deterrence. If we made it clear that no good would come of anyone crossing our paths, then potential ne’er-do-wells would behave. Danger on the road isn’t the only thing we needed to keep an eye out for.

“You want to stay especially wary of people who try to open the lids by a crack or take their goods in a different direction to the storehouse. The merchants are keeping their eyes peeled too, of course, but the more eyes the better, really. There are greedy lords who’ll ask their people to nab a couple samples from what we off-load so they can ‘double-check’ the stock in their storehouse later and come back to us complaining that they’re short.”

“Oh, I get it. I’ve seen some big bosses try and pick a fight with a merchant before; so that was their game, huh. Tch, guess you get bastards like that wherever you go. Pisses me off seeing people do underhanded shit like that.”

“The easiest ploy is to say you didn’t get what you paid for. It’s quicker to just cough up the extra stock instead of wasting time looking for whoever had sticky fingers. That goes especially so during fall when everyone’s so busy.”

Business picking up and getting harder as the cold sets in was universal among both farmers and merchants. All the travel and sleeping rough got taxing—unlike the warm summer months when you could lay under the stars with your cloak over you without fear of freezing to death, unless you did something *particularly* stupid. Caravans which hadn’t prepared proper tents and gear could often find themselves at a standstill. Therefore, they often had to compromise by asking for more time in their deliveries.

We needed to keep our eyes sharp so that we wouldn’t succumb to the same fate.

Hansel was my primary source for much of this advice. You wouldn’t realize unless you travel the world and see other places, but common knowledge and general attitudes in a canton are always characterized by the nearest larger settlement. In the case of my canton, we were influenced by the nearby city, for better or worse. When you compared it to how things were around here, my little canton was almost like a city in itself. I was shocked when he first told me.

These were my preconceptions talking again, but I was surprised that there were people who’d be willing to play these kinds of high-risk games of trust for a little quick coin.

I supposed rumors couldn’t spread that wide here. The information network was small and very few cantons were all that prosperous, meaning people traffic was slow and superficial. There wasn’t much risk to run from pissing off a couple of small-potatoes merchants every season. This had probably resulted in more people realizing that you had nothing to lose and plenty to gain from a little petty theft.

Again, such behavior was unthinkable where I was from. Caravans were our prime source of supplies and entertainment—small though they might be—so

cheating them was out of the question. If merchant caravans began to avoid the canton because it had fallen into disrepute, then the local people would be the first to suffer.

“Man, adventurers really do gotta learn a lot,” Siegfried said with a frown and his hand on his chin after I passed Hansel’s tips along.

I supposed that for Siegfried, who chose the path of adventurer with dreams of one day becoming a hero, this crude, mercantile job wasn’t to his liking.

All the same, for us greenhorns without the CVs to start getting jobs handed down from the literal heavens, such groundwork was crucial to our development. Only the truly desperate would trust a rank amateur with anything *really* important.

All told, while we had a job to do, it was pretty light work, and we were relatively free to do as we pleased. I realized that talking about work all day would be mentally exhausting, so in between giving Siegfried pointers—such as being wary of anyone with particularly baggy sleeves—we made a little small talk.

“I was born east and south of here, so I’m not really familiar with life in these parts; what’s winter like?”

“Winter? Well, by the time the harvest’s up it’s pretty damn cold. We get blizzards once every, I dunno, few years or so, but it isn’t weird to see enough snow pile up to lock down carriage travel.”

As Siegfried grumbled about how it sucked to have buckets of water freeze, I smiled inwardly at our friendship’s apparent development. I mean, he was my first-ever adventurer buddy after all. I’d have liked to share with him what I’d learned.

“So I guess the caravans will be stopping business soon, then? This is about the time when farmers start to work on other things that aren’t farming.”

“Nah, there are some who avoid working in the snow, but lots of people do stuff like woodcutting during the winter, so it’s pretty busy for the whole year. The cold’s not gonna stop a tree from falling, if you get me.”

Ahh, yeah, that totally makes sense. Even if the cold hard ground of winter

meant that you couldn't easily uproot trees, they could still be cut down, and the rest of the work could be left until it got warmer.

"I see. I also noticed that the carriages' wheels are a lot wider than what I'm used to seeing. Is that another measure against the snow?"

"Huh? Isn't that just what wheels look like?"

"No, they're far bigger than the wheels you see in Berylin. Not only that, the shapes of the roofs and the way stone walls are constructed here are different. It's interesting see how things differ in other parts of the same country."

"Did you say Berylin?! The hell were you there for?"

"I was just a mere servant. I was working to pay off my little sister's educational expenses."

"You didn't go to a private school but you worked so much to pay for your sister to go? Isn't that...weird?"

It took around half an hour for the unloading to finish as me and my new friend shot the breeze. Uzu said we'd stay for two nights to let the horses rest and so with that our work was done until we set off again.

Adventurers and merchants alike were scheduled to camp out, but the canton showed their kind favor in opening their baths to us.

Oh yeah, that's what I'm talking about. I had been using a cloth soaked in warm water to wipe myself down, but nothing beat a good old bath. For someone who got used to soaking in an imperial bath once every other day—aside from the days when it would be so late that they were filthy—long journeys were pretty brutal. *Maybe I had pampered myself just a little too much in the Imperial capital.*

People had broken off into smaller groups to rest and set about with cleanup; I had been talking with some others when Uzu came up to me with a personal request.

"Um, excuse me. I have a few things of importance in my room, so I was hoping I could ask you to keep watch, Sir Erich."

"Of course. Would you like me to bring some others to help?"

“No, just you will be fine.”

The canton was still developing, so the local lord’s mansion was kind of shoddy—ahem, pardon, *modest*, but fortunately it seemed they had at least set aside a room for our VIP mage. I was the only one who had been told about this arrangement. This whole thing had been funded by the Baldur Clan, so on paper Nanna was staying with us in the tents. *Being a subcontractor’s unfair in any world, huh.*

“Will you be going to the baths when the women’s shift comes?” I asked.

“N-No, I’ll be quite fine. I’ve got my magic to help with that.”

Yeah, I suppose it was natural for a mage who can literally fly to learn a simple spell like Clean. Obviously I could cast it too, but it wouldn’t fit the image of a traveling adventurer if I was too well-kept, so I’d held myself in check. *Ugh, I wish I didn’t have to.*

“I-I imagine I’ll be sleeping for a r-rather long time tonight.”

“Understood. I’ll stay on guard until you wake. Take as long as you need.”

Uzu still stammered when she talked to me, but it seemed she trusted me enough to guard her while she slept. She placed a hand into her breast pocket and was visibly relieved to see that her chartula was still present. Dark circles showed under her eyes. I think she hadn’t slept for days. She had been holding off on taking her medicine in case of an emergency and had only been able to catch catnaps. I had seen her jolt awake every time the carriage shook on the way down.

Real rest would come for her quickly now that she had finished her work, found a roof over her head, and still had Nanna’s disturbing “sleep aid.”

“Is it not dangerous?”

“I-Is what dangerous?”

“The drugs you take. You seemed to be in quite some pain that time I deprived you of a hit for a few days. Aren’t they a bit dangerous to take on a regular basis?”

Perhaps I’d triggered some trauma. The memories of me locking her up and

making her go cold turkey must have zapped through her brain; she leaped up with a squeal.

“W-Well, ph-physically speaking...I’m not addicted, o-of course. B-But maybe it’s t-tough on my l-liver and k-kidneys, so the boss advised me to t-take other medications w-with it...”

Uzu started babbling on about how other members in the clan didn’t follow Nanna’s advice when they dosed.

Alongside the legal medicines, such as the ones we were delivering now, the Baldur Clan dealt in three variants of illicit drugs. I was a bit curious about their business, so I’d asked Kaya about it, as she was a bit of a potions expert herself. She was only going by hearsay, but apparently Nanna’s goods produced fewer physical problems than opiates or other cheap narcotic potions. Before Nanna had seized her turf, the drugs in circulation were badly regulated—they were addictive and caused painful withdrawal symptoms: by all accounts, it felt like having a whole anthill bloom, hungry and furious, under your skin. I couldn’t really condone what she did, but compared to how things were before? Well.

The first of Nanna’s potions was Sweet Dreams, an addictive sleep aid and Uzu’s research chemical of choice; it caused insomnia if you chose to cut it out. If that wasn’t rough enough, going back to your usual REM-fueled nightly hallucinations felt like a biblical fall from grace.

The second was the Patent Hedonizer, which deadened the neurological signals for pain response and heightened pleasure. Under the effects of the Hedonizer, even the most meager bowl of gruel would taste like *haute cuisine*. Even passing urine would bring about unsurpassable pleasure. On the other hand, you could shatter every bone in your body and not even notice. A real piece of work, that one.

The last drug on Nanna’s menu was called Liquid Insight—a potent mood stabilizer that instilled a mental state comparable to actual enlightenment. I had to wonder what the Buddhists back home would make of trying to dope your way to Nirvana. For those nobles wishing to seek a temporary respite from interpersonal business, one hit of this stuff provided a real place of refuge.

These last two were similar to other combat drugs I’d seen, but all three were

custom-tailored to one goal: changing the pain of living into pleasure. They were all false starts and dead ends in Nanna's pursuit of her panacea against the false world of the senses and all its agonies—the very same pursuit that led to her expulsion from the College.

“I-It r-really doesn't affect m-my body all too much... I-I mean I *c-could* sleep without it i-if I wanted to...b-but the quality of sleep...i-is just incomparable.”

I almost couldn't believe that there were no physical side effects despite seeing her clear addiction to the damn thing. In my opinion, the drug's “withdrawal symptoms”—in other words, the inability to not sleep for three whole days after going without long enough—seemed to be a far craftier way of destroying someone's mental faculties than a more direct method.

Of course, broken brain cells and neurons could be fixed with miracles or high-level iatrygy, but *memories* couldn't be so easily changed. Unless you forcibly erased memories and reset someone's brain to factory settings, there was no plausible way of getting rid of the hunger or the deep-set despair toward the mortal world that the drug had originally awakened in them.

Talk about troublesome—both Nanna's unbearable worldly struggles and the “failed” potions that had come of them.

“I-If you like...w-would you like to sample s-some?”

Uzu held out the chartula with a coaxing smile. I abstained.

“I'm fine, thank you. I prefer to bend reality to my whims by my own means. If I wish to achieve glory with my blade, then I can't waste my time with something that isn't the real thing while I'm asleep, can I?”

I had no need of any of Nanna's drugs. I didn't need that kind of crutch now, nor did I plan on sinking low enough to need it in the future. The dreams I had were right here before my eyes. All my struggles, all my mind-numbing busywork, had piled into a mountain, and from my place at the top I could see my fantasy of adventure glittering right here in front of me.

“W-Wow... Y-You really are something else...”

Yeah, I dunno what else you would say to someone who so flatly turned down your proposal while criticizing it.

In ways, I stood above my peers. I was lucky in that the future Buddha gave me a way to turn my hard work and efforts into a very palpable result. As long as I put in the work, even if it was inefficient, I would start to collect experience that I could bend to my own purposes tomorrow and onward. And then with one simple tap I could dump that all into a very real change in my being.

Only when someone's will breaks does the effort they spent so long pooling turn to a waste.

I might have had no way of guaranteeing a secure lifestyle, but I was almost guaranteed to grow proficient at something as long as I put the work in. It was a miracle that was far, *far* more valuable than having been born into a wealthy household. After all, this was a gift from the gods that existed far above our mortal plane.

"I won't stop you doing as you will. Please, enjoy a well-deserved rest."

I ushered Uzu inside, closed the door, then leaned on the wall next to it in a relaxed yet vigilant position.

Necessary evils, huh... I wasn't particularly fond of the concept, but it was true that Nanna's concoctions were preferable to trash that melted your stomach or brought about a madness so deep you didn't realize death had come to you. Nanna had run her monopoly with real savvy, and I had to admit that her clan was at least more upright than the previous overlords.

That was probably a reason why moral folk in Marsheim like Mister Fidelio hadn't gotten rid of her, despite the troubles she was inarguably causing.

Don't start something you won't be able to take care of—now or in the future. This was an ironclad rule for everyone, not just adventurers. Any hero worth a damn couldn't just pat themselves on the back for a job well done for slapping down a few scoundrels and creating a transitory moment of quiet around town. Some other pack of bastards would want their own share of the pie, and there was no guarantee that they would be more ethically minded than their predecessors. One single person didn't have the power it took to fully purge evil right down to the root.

So, I needed to content myself with the notion that this was not the worst possible scenario.

All the same, I was fully aware addiction—even if it didn't result in physical symptoms—was nothing to sneeze at. Some people went mad from sugar withdrawal; some people couldn't stomach a normal BBQ place after sampling high-quality meat. There was just no getting around the inherent trouble of living. It was enough to leave a fellow feeling real Gnostic about it all. If some supreme being had the power to create a kind world where everyone was promised a happy ending, then why hadn't they? The gods that managed this world—and in the case of my old world too—must have had their reasons.

Whatever the case, I've vowed to live this life to the fullest. Right until the day where Erich of Konigstuhl is satisfied with a life well adventured.

[Tips] The drugs peddled by the Baldur Clan amount to nothing more than the failures from their master's pursuit of a way to abolish the physical pains of this world. Though they incur no unintended physical side effects, the withdrawal symptoms are severe. Some unfortunate souls beg for death if they are parted from their crutch. They are nothing more than the last respite for those whose hearts the world has broken beyond repair.

The work was filthy at times, and life could get him down powerfully, but for Siegfried the reasons to keep chasing after his dreams of heroism still firmly outnumbered the reasons to abandon them.

He'd stormed out of his home after a big fight with his family. He'd pilfered his spear and sword from the Watch's storehouse. His childhood friend, whose prospects were far brighter than his, came along with him out of concern and never complained.

He knew full well that this amounted to nothing more than idle vanity, but Dirk of Illfurth had propped himself up on such reasons through every exhausting day of idle labor.

It was true that Kaya's influence elevated him from dirt in the gutter to something marginally more tolerable, but for this young man who had gone as far to change his name to that of his revered hero, the work was still a far cry from anything heroic. A poem written about him now would amount to little

more than a gussied-up list of his complaints.

Kaya's help weighed heavily on him—almost as much as how little his efforts to keep her protected amounted to. The onslaught of clan invitations had lessened recently, but Siegfried still felt it bear down on him. A hero needed to hold his own—to be self-sufficient.

Maybe that's why he had flared up so angrily at his peer.

And why...

“Whoooa! I think it hit me! D-Do I still have an ear?!”

“Cool it, Sieg! You'll make *me* go deaf!”

...he had allowed himself to squeeze close to this same guy on the back of a bucking horse as he squealed in terror.

He'd abandoned a life empty of prospects for a future of wealth, glory, and renown that would draw the curious to his gravesite for ages to come. So what happened? He had been on a relatively mindless job alongside a gaggle of bodyguards doing very little actual guard work. Despite the good pay of fifty assarii per day, the gig was a dull one: hang around the caravans, discourage bandits, and keep an eye out for pickpockets.

And yet here he was now—barely holding on to a horse as an organized mob of bandits followed behind, baying for their blood.

This is what he got for trying to overtake his overachieving comrade. For some reason Goldilocks had taken a liking to him and offered him this well-paying gig, but it seemed like his luck had run its course. Now he was barely hanging on under a literal storm of arrows.

“They're well equipped! Think they're a local lord's own little private army?!”

“Gwaaah, don't ask me! Oh crap—that was close!”

Yes, it had been tedious work. The caravans had five of their own personal bodyguards and a dozen or so hired adventurers to pad out the count. With such a large group of bodyguards and eight mule-led caravans, a number of travelers had joined the group, bringing the overall procession to over fifty people. The chances of such a group being attacked were incredibly small.

Siegfried had been *certain* they wouldn't be attacked. Unless the charge was led by a legion of skilled and well-trained soldiers or a platoon clad in high-quality armor, it was the *opposing* side that was sure to end up feeling the hurt. Any regular bandit wouldn't even think to attack such a huge group.

However, the problem lay in the fact that the group attacking them with all the fervor in the world were anything but your run-of-the-mill bandits.

The night had begun with Siegfried watching over the caravans setting up camp. Kaya was applying her skills to a few travel-sick members of their party. Erich had announced that he was going to scout the area on horseback. The knapsack arachne had been asleep, making sure she'd be set for her late-night shift.

It would be a lie to say that Siegfried hadn't started to drop his guard now that their twenty-day excursion was drawing to a close.

Who could have envisioned that the twilit quiet of the scene would be broken by the keening whistle of a signal arrow just as the mob began its assault.

Even if their surprise attack had failed, the bandits seemed not to care so long as they got the same end result; their incursion began with taking down Siegfried, who was nearest to their group. The bandit rulebook dictated that they leave no survivors.

In all honesty, Siegfried was ready to die in that moment. After all, what could a soot-black adventurer armed only with a sword and short spear do against a wall of polearms?

A disciplined, close-formation march with spears at the ready was the ideal way to maneuver while maintaining a firm defense. Siegfried recalled that this was the first formation the Watch back home had taught to protect their canton.

Fearing that swords glinting in the last vestiges of the setting sun would be the last sight he would ever see, with shaking knees Siegfried clasped his spear, uncertain if it would even reach the incomers.

As his rational mind battered him with reminders that his last stand would be meager and ineffectual, the bandits scattered as a horse galloped through, light

as fabric on the wind. With one swing, the enemy formation was broken, and Erich sheathed his sword, having come back in the nick of time.

“Get on!”

Siegfried grabbed his outstretched hand and was swung up onto the saddle—he felt *something else* touching him as his body was lifted up into the air, but maybe it was his imagination—and was filled with relief.

However, the second surprise hit in the next instant. After all, Goldilocks, whom Siegfried still wouldn’t let himself like, placed himself at the backs of the fleeing merchants.

Come on man, this is a job to leave to the more experienced bodyguards!

A life just wasn’t worth fifty assarii. What could a newbie and someone who’d just shaken off his soot do in this situation?

“Don’t worry, Sieg—they value their lives too! They won’t keep hounding a caravan if it means no one is around to enjoy the spoils. If we can take out five or six of them, then I bet we’ll break their formation!”

Siegfried couldn’t voice his complaint that his issue lay elsewhere. A case could be made that it was a matter of willpower; more likely it was because he was being shaken so violently he couldn’t form a coherent syllable. At any rate, his mind was elsewhere—his hands were full with mounting a counteroffensive with a crossbow that he’d just been given and didn’t know how to use.

Siegfried didn’t have his head on straight enough to even take in Erich’s own marksmanship, nor his ability to swipe arrows out of the sky with his sword. The confident adventurer was hotdogging now, egging the bandits on while maintaining a position just shy of the enemy’s marks and deftly deferring them from a clean path forward.

“You all right there, Sieg? Run out of bolts? Keep those hands moving!”

“Sh-Shut the hell up, I’ve never *touched* a crossbow before!”

“Then you better get used to it quick! Stay focused—you want to keep people safe, you’d better learn how to play rear guard! If we make it back alive, it might not be enough work to be penned as a tale, but it’s sure to be a badge of

honor to share!”

As tears streamed from his eyes and spit trickled from his mouth, Siegfried realized something. Erich of Konigstuhl, with his beaming smile and glittering eyes as he swung his sword, wasn't just suspicious—no, he was downright *strange*.

But it could wait. It might have only been one of the lesser parts of valor, but if he was being relied upon, Siegfried would do his absolute best to live up to the task.

“D...Don't order me around! I was just loading the next bolt! I'm gonna be a hero! A way better and more renowned hero than you'll ever be!”

A man didn't need a deep reason to put his life on the line—he might do so because leaving at that time would be uncool; because it would be pathetic to run away; because the other man sitting in front of him was fighting with eye-opening splendor.

And because any self-deprecating thoughts, any fear, was something his comrade would never see if he simply kept them hidden. The only truth that would remain is that two young adventurers put their lives on the line to protect their charge.

[Tips] Those in power are as aware as the lowest guttersnipe of the universal fact that a crime is not a crime unless it is found out.

I had an inkling about it, but I was faced with the truth of the matter—I'd gotten rusty.

There were two days left until we got back to Marsheim. The journey had been uneventful—no one had tried to argue about prices and no foolish canton youngsters had tried to pick a fight. We had come this far, and the end of the journey was in sight, so it was probably my fault for acting sloppy.

All the same, you need to understand—no one would expect a local mover and shaker to put this much money into an assault on our little parade. I suppose that the preconception was a holdover from my previous life. Not even

the poorest or most pathetic merchants would bother trying to steal from their fellows in their own lands, short of something crazy like burning everything to the ground and scouring the wreckage for something of value.

Marsheim was a melting pot of goods from various foreign countries, and so caravans traveled in and out no matter the season. The wide Mauser River was used to transport goods, and so the number of merchants taking their stock both east and west was unimaginable.

Some even postulated that traveling merchants outnumbered farmers.

In other words, if you dispatched your target and didn't leave a single trace, then one or two missing merchants would be chalked up to bad luck on the road. As long as the perp didn't get too greedy, their misdeed would remain buried in the darkness forever.

It wasn't too surprising, then, that a few greed-stricken folks would be up for a deeply stupid move in the name of a short-term profit. After all, a caravan passing through your land is only worthless if you choose to ignore it.

But good grief, you didn't have to go this far out of your way to attack a caravan that had purposefully avoided your fake-ass checkpoint.

It seemed like Lady Luck hated me as much as ever. It pained me that my constitutionally bad luck had roped in my beginner friend too.

The thing was, Nanna and I had made a deal that I would lend a hand in an emergency if someone should shout, "Help us out, boss!" and she was paying me enough that I would happily oblige and watch the rear in the event of an attack.

But Siegfried—whom I had invited—wasn't privy to this deal.

My affection for the guy was one-sided, and he had only taken the job after comparing it to his usual lot despite his suspicions about me. It had been the size of the payout that pushed him over the edge—most people, barring a few notable exceptions, needed to eat in order to live.

But *come on* God of Trials, capping off his first-ever excursion out of the city with a climax on this scale? Give the poor guy a break! I know on paper we were both Level 1 Fighters, but this was gonna be way too much for a newbie when

he was just learning the ropes at playing bodyguard.

I had seen promise in the kid. He'd gotten good at horse riding pretty quickly and he knew his way around a couple of weapons. Despite this journey being sprung on him, he had packed accordingly and he had decided whether to come based on his friend's condition. I was impressed, to be honest. I didn't altogether expect him to account for his partner's "monthly status effect."

I wanted my first-ever joint mission with Siegfried and Kaya to end in a fun way.

So naturally, there was a seething heap of brigands waiting for me when I went out scouting.

On top of that, they were *good fighters*. I mentally filed another complaint with my old friend the Goddess of Dice.

I had tried to seize the initiative and drop them swiftly, but they successfully repelled my horseback assault. I wanted to have a little chat with them, so naturally I hadn't put my absolute all into my attack, but I was still impressed that they had managed to swipe back despite my taking the lead.

Still, I managed to thrust my eastern crossbow—they were damn useful, as I could use one in either hand—into one of their stomachs to throw them off me and stay in the game, but it had been a long time since I'd had this feeling of a not-so-easy win.

I was no pushover. I didn't yet have Horseback Combat, so I needed to rely on my usual plan of brute-forcing my way through with twinkled-out Dexterity-based swordsmanship. I was confident that I could land blows that would knock your average bandit out cold without going the extra mile to kill them—but riding a horse put me at a disadvantage. My assault hadn't ended in a quick and easy win.

I wasn't dealing with your average bandit. These were hired pros with intimate knowledge of mounted, armored guerrilla combat.

What's wrong with you, GM? This is not the kind of boss you throw a squishy beginner at!

I had sensed danger and fired off a warning arrow. Other members of the

caravan had still been getting started with the night's preparations, so I needed to let them know they needed to run.

To no one's surprise, I ended up engaging the bandits just as they were almost at our campsite. I passed along a quick summary of my appraisal of their combat ability. Even the least well equipped were clad in thin armor. Their weapons weren't the rusted, inconsistent fare a gaggle of bandits would have, but spears polished to a gleaming point and composite bows loaded with cast-iron arrowheads.

You're not fooling anyone if you say you "just happened" to be here, I wanted to scream.

They had been in a horizontal formation when I first came on the scene and made my attack, but they were only a handful of paces away from Siegfried, who I imagined had put himself at the head of their assault.

A row of spear wielders was certain death for a solo warrior. Polearms were a simple tool and their reach could cause total chaos in a melee, but when they came together to form a spear wall like this, they were incredibly deadly. I mean, if a mercenary like Sir Lambert were here, he could keep himself safe in thick full-body armor and swipe away any foolish attacks before smashing through their spears like twigs with a huge two-hander to break through their formation without even breaking a sweat. However, for a newbie whose experience was thin on the ground, chances were he'd walk away looking like a human pincushion.

I couldn't leave my coworker to the wolves, so I took a gamble and rushed into the fray. I was fully prepared to use my magic, should the situation call for it.

As martial techniques advanced and turtle formations became a fundamental tactic, the position of a singular mounted knight as the center of battle grew less common, but they still had shock and awe value. Imagine a horse suddenly crashing into battle—a beast that weighed hundreds of kilos and could gallop faster than your average moped. The trampling of its hooves was far more deadly than being caught under someone's wheels—being crushed underfoot would leave the average person with severe injuries if they were *lucky*.

I spurred Castor on as I swung my sword through their flank to try and force the formation to scatter. A number of them went flying with cartoonish force before crashing to the ground with a satisfying *crunch*. All the while I raced to save my friend, who was growing ever more surrounded.

It was quite the dramatic save, I guess, but our job wasn't done. The offensive had already begun—they wouldn't turn tail due to a little hiccup like this. Chances were that this attack had never been planned from just one direction. Approaching in a pincer movement was Surprise Assault 101. There was a less than zero chance that such a well-organized group would fail to employ the basics.

If it came to it, I would have to get my ally out of here, staving off the enemies from the front or the flanks as he made his escape. My warning arrow had already sent the announcement of enemy assault, so the other bodyguards and my napping partner would respond before long.

The most important thing right now was thinning out the numbers approaching from our rear as much as we could.

I estimated the enemy's headcount, including those who had yet to arrive, at around twenty. This was a little more than two boys on a horse should have to deal with, but when compared with, I dunno, the Genpei War, I was confident that we had this in the bag. It wasn't like we had to shoot down fans while on a rocking boat or fire a cannon to sink a distant battleship.

My crossbow let me pull off a perfect Parthian shot—a technique where you fire behind you while riding—and I also had another passenger atop Castor's behind for double the firepower. All I had to do was keep my distance from their spears as I intercepted their fire while egging them on with a "Hey, bud? How's it feel? How's it feel?!" Fleeing like this would be way easier than doing it on foot. No sweat.

Siegfried was screaming and cursing now, but, well, he'd get used to it. My first time in battle had been pants-soakingly frightful and I legitimately thought I might die. To be honest, the bigger the foe, the quicker you adjust to future battles. Take it from a guy with firsthand experience.

Despite our opponents' training and experience, at the end of the day they

were bandits in search of a quick payday. They weren't patriotic souls riding high on adrenaline as they fought to the death for their homeland. Take down four or five and they'd realize the losses outweighed any possible gains and run on home.

Hmm, come to think of it, there's an awfully long gap between their shots. Maybe they're unused to attacking a fleeing foe from afar?

No huge surprise there. For a while, fighters were expected to have some proficiency in projectile weapons, but bows and crossbows were the wheelhouse of archers. Regular old fighters *could* use them, yes, but not like an expert.

I had been trying to light a fire under Siegfried, and finally I'd gotten a hearty, if quavering, response. *Good, good; nicely said, my young adventurer.*

The bandits stuck at it until seven of their number had fallen. On our way back to the caravan, we ended up encountering a hastily built anticavalry palisade, so I ended up having to slam my sword into the guts of another eight bandits to neutralize them.

As a result, not only had we managed to make a successful escape, we'd administered a savage beatdown in the process. In any case, I was only trying to keep the caravan safe, so, uh, *kudos to me!*

Another little piece of good fortune was that in immobilizing the enemy, I managed to snag some pretty sweet loot off the chumps, which was a nice surprise.

I shared with Siegfried, naturally.

Our little escapade resulted in a comparable boost to our fame—more than likely Nanna had done a little PR on our behalf—and Siegfried, depending on who you asked, was now either Siegfried the Lucky or Siegfried the Hapless.

He really had done a good job; I kind of wished something with a nicer ring to it had stuck, but alas.

[Tips] An alias is given by those who hear of the person's feats, but penned stories are not always an accurate representation of reality.

It was a disgusting smell: the foul reek of blood and excrement seeping from intestines bared to the open air.

Siegfried shook as the reality of battle belatedly sank in.

He had been totally preoccupied during the fight itself, but the realization had come to him after their enemies had fled: battle did not end as beautifully as the songs would have you believe. Routed foes left a foul stench.

Before Siegfried's eyes a man let out a pathetic groan. A bolt stuck from his stomach as the life trickled from his carcass.

He was a mensch, just like Siegfried, no older than his father.

The man had chosen a cruel and unjust line of work, it was true, but Siegfried couldn't pair him with the image of the evil foes that always came out beaten at the end in his beloved tales.

He looked like a normal man—nothing more, nothing less. He wasn't ugly like the wicked men in the stories. If he had been dressed normally, you couldn't have told him apart from any other guy on the street. Blood ran from his mouth, and the sight of him clutching his stomach sent pity racing through the heart of the young adventurer.

The bandits had attacked with the suddenness of a rushing stream; now that the dust had settled his memories were hazy.

Had I fired that bolt? Siegfried couldn't remember how many shots he'd fired, or at whom.

"Help...me..."

"Siegfried. Looks like we got a survivor, huh?"

Erich approached with light steps from the site of battle as Siegfried struggled with a vaster consternation than he had ever known in the face of the man's request. All the while, Erich cleaned his dagger of filth.

"What's gotten into you? You need to finish the job."

"F-Finish the job...?"

“Yeah. There’s no saving him.”

Goldilocks uttered this statement as if he were talking about a pig at market as he assessed the man’s wounds.

The heavy crossbow’s firepower had earned it a nickname—the knight-killer. At a close enough distance, it could easily pierce right through cloth armor. The bolt had penetrated the man’s bowels as it spun, churning his guts into a slurry that slopped from the wound.

His own excrement would infect his damaged internal organs. Only the most brilliant iatruygy, conjured in that very moment, would save him. If he didn’t die soon, it would draw out over the next few days. The garbage that everyone holds within them is a fatal poison if it escapes from where it belongs.

All the while the open wound would be a breeding ground for new infections. Even with a high pain threshold, no one could prevent themselves from bleeding out.

There was no avoiding the end now, no chance for last-minute mercy—save the bitterest kind.

“So you need to end his life swiftly. A prolonged death is a painful one.”

“W-Wait, you say that, but I...”

“...Am an adventurer. *Right?*”

Siegfried instinctively caught whatever it was that Erich had thrown his way.

It was a sword. Goldilocks had taken it from another corpse, almost as if he were accepting an apology for their assault. It was well-made, nothing like Siegfried’s own shoddy iron stick.

It might have been a nameless sword, churned out with a hundred like it, but all the same someone had crafted it and its blade had been sharpened. It glinted keenly in the evening sun as if to let Siegfried know that although it hadn’t fulfilled its original purpose, it wouldn’t mind who swung it at whom so long as it was swung.

“Use it. I saw you caring for your sword, but I’m afraid it isn’t very good. You deserve something better.”

“H-Hold on... K-Kaya can fix him up...”

“And then what? His condition’s beyond what even a talented mage can fix, and even if they did, having a live hostage wouldn’t solve anything. If we took him along with us, that won’t change the fact that he’s a bandit. It doesn’t matter if he was hired by someone upright, they don’t care. Both his employer and the government would treat him as a deserter. The result would be the same.”

As Erich told him this, Siegfried recalled something. Back in his canton, the heads of convicted felons were preserved and put on display as a warning. He had seen more bodies than he could count similarly strung up on the roads. Although they had been preserved to slow their decay, carrion birds and the ravages of the weather wore away at them regardless. They were gruesome to look at; the sight had made Siegfried burst into tears as a young boy.

“Did you also forget that they were all too ready to kill us during their assault? Surely their morals would dictate that their own lives were fair game.”

“P-Please... Help me... I don’t...wanna die... I got...a wife...and a son...”

Despite standing on the cusp of certain death and knowing that he had no future, still the man begged.

“You realize that we have families too, don’t you? You tried to kill me, but I, too, have a father, mother, brothers, a sister, and friends who would mourn if they never heard from me again. I’m in the same position as you. Enough sniveling. If you really picked a fight with such weak resolve, then you deserve to make amends through your death.”

However, Erich’s callousness in the face of this dying man was far more terrifying to Siegfried than the lifeless heads from his past.

He’s used to all of this, he thought.

Goldilocks sighed as he watched Siegfried clutch the sword in his hands with no intent to draw it.

“If you can’t do it, shall I? I only need his head to collect the bounty. Shame; he would have fetched a better price alive.”

“A better price?! You heartless bastard, does someone’s life mean so little to you?”

“And what kind of fucking game do you think this is, y’brat?!”

Siegfried was taken aback by Erich’s statement. All the rough countryside manner he’d reserved solely for jokes before came out at once. Although he hadn’t raised his voice, it carried such a vicious sentiment that he might as well have been shouting.

“Adventurers are violent creatures; we kill until we’re killed in turn! If you can’t hack it, head on back home! Don’t waste your days agonizing! If this ain’t the job for you, then put down the sword, pick up a sickle, and get back to the fields instead!”

Erich drew Schutzwolfe—the sword that he had proudly said he had inherited from his father. When Siegfried had heard the story that night as they sat around the bonfire, a familiar jealousy had reared its ugly head, thinking that Erich was blessed to have received such a beautiful sword. Now he understood.

A sword was naught but a tool for stealing other folk’s lives. The only variation came in who it was pointed at and the cause that theft served. Whoever the wielder, whatever the purpose, blood and blood alone would follow.

Heroic tales were written in the stuff. The story was embellished and toned down in places, all for the sake of pleasing the audience, but they ended in death, without exception.

If the hero did not take the life of the evil tyrant, then the criminal would end up being publicly executed as an example. In all honesty, stories which ended with blood on the hero’s hands proved far more cathartic.

Hero or criminal, for both sorts blood was their trade, their art, and their reward.

Yes, the tyrants and crooks arrayed against a hero were most often worse folk with fouler intentions—to what end but stopping a greater evil could anyone excuse (worse yet, *praise*) a killer? It was a bitter calculus, best reserved for those rare few who already had the appetite for such faint praise: *Thank you for*

doing what we needed but could not want for ourselves.

“Come on. Out of the way. I’ll do it.”

Receiving Goldilocks’s cruel gaze, Siegfried finally understood his situation.

This was reality. It bore no resemblance to life back home, crammed into a tiny bed with his brothers, where he had dreams of slicing the bad guy to pieces without a drop of blood shed. So it would be for any adventurer.

As he took in the foul, stinging stench, Siegfried considered a very real possibility.

If I make even one wrong move, it’ll be me here, groaning on the ground.

An even worse fate could be in store. He pictured the hateful, bloodcurdling fate that might await his own best friend, all because she happened to be a woman following the same path.

Another thought came upon him. If they hadn’t stopped the men here, what might they have done to someone else?

A hero was someone who protected the people.

“Worked up your nerve? Okay, do it.”

Goldilocks lowered his sword. He had noticed that something in Siegfried’s eyes had changed. He pointed at the man, who still pleaded for his life.

“He’s wearing armor, so you need to strike somewhere unprotected.”

“H-His...neck...?”

“Yeah. We can collect the head later. First you need to put him out of his misery.”

“Wait! Stop, plea—”

Maybe the man’s heart now beat at a slow, dull pace, for the spurt of blood that shone in the twilight was small. Yet the boy found himself with blood dirtying his face, throwing the old scar on his cheek into relief.



“Oof, that’s not pleasant. If you strike at the wrong angle you can end up dirtying yourself.”

In that moment, Siegfried had taken one step closer to the life he’d sought. One step closer to the legend he dreamed of becoming. One step further from everything else. It didn’t feel like killing a fellow mensch. Maybe it was the quality of the sword that Erich had picked out as worthy spoils, but the dead man’s flesh hardly pushed back against its edge.

It felt unreal, more a thing taken straight from the tales than forged from crude matter.

“Anyway, congrats on your first kill. I take back what I said—Siegfried, you’ve got the right stuff.”

Erich went on to talk about how trepidation over a kill didn’t mean you were incapable, his voice filled with remorse for his past self. But his words barely reached Siegfried’s ears, as if he were speaking to someone else entirely.

All the same, Siegfried had walked away with no small profit:

A high-quality sword, a set of armor that would fit him once he’d grown a bit or paid for some adjustments, and the sense that he was finally initiated into this grand and storied line of butchers.

[Tips] True mercy requires an awareness of the possibilities of a job left undone. If a spared foe causes problems elsewhere, the one who chose not to make the kill bears some part of the blame.

“You need to make the cut in between the cervical vertebrae. Otherwise you’ll hit bone, you won’t make a clean cut, and you might chip your blade if you’re not careful. You got all that?”

As I gave Siegfried a rundown of how best to deal with a body, I wondered if I was being a bit too harsh on the guy. But be that as it may, he needed to internalize this stuff if he was going to have any future as a fellow career killer.

In my case, when it came to the genuine bastards I’d had to fight, I’d only left

them alive (if not wholly *intact*; try disarming a guy without at least mangling his fingers before you start giving me a hard time) for practical purposes—better intel or a bigger bounty. Of course, if I genuinely *pitied* the poor soul I was fighting, I felt comfortable leaving them with a sound but nonlethal beatdown; usually that was cause enough for a fellow to reevaluate their life choices. But the thing about Rhinian society was that what awaited a criminal, whether it was their first offense or their hundredth, was a sentence akin to death. For many, it boiled down to a cut-and-dried public execution; the lucky ones, if you could really call it “luck,” were consigned to spend the remainder of their days spent literally shackled in brutal indentured servitude.

Even if I didn’t man the guillotine myself, turning in a live bounty amounted to little more than delayed murder. No adventurer could last long without taking the lesson to heart.

I’d taken pity on Dietrich because she had only known death through ritual combat or war. I hadn’t turned in those dipshit “fellow adventurers”—no fellows of *mine*, mind you—on the same trip home because I didn’t want to frighten the caravan too much. Not that there was anywhere I would have been able to hand them in in the first place; I supposed that had played a part in saving their bacon. And again, I didn’t take any lives during my scuffles with the brutish clans of Marsheim because I didn’t want to propel a small conflict into all-out anarchy.

Today’s pack of murderous devils were an altogether different bunch. Their work was well honed and effective. Piles of corpses lay in their wake, even if we’d never had a chance to see them. Simple roadside thugs they were not.

That prick’s parting words had irked me more than they should have. Was he serious with that “I have a wife and kids” spiel? We all had people we cared about who would shed tears if our lives were cut short on the road.

As it stood, we lived in a world that sustained a class of truly vicious scumbags that made certain literal bloodsucking nobles I could name look morally complex or outright saintly by comparison—and in dealings with that class, “preemptive violence” and “preventive care” start to look very much alike. There’s a statistically inevitable human cost proportional to how long they’re even allowed to remain in captivity; let just one make a jailbreak and they’ll

take out their thirst for vengeance on everyone in reach. Sure, you could chalk it up to the GM's desire to establish tone and keep the gameplay loop rolling, but at the end of the day, I still figured it was better to shoulder the trauma of snuffing out the candle of a two-time offender than let however many innocent bystanders catch all the heat. I know how that moral calculus simplifies down; I can afford the bad dreams.

Spitting in the face of that pathetic creep as he begged for his life without compunction was far simpler than letting the shapeless guilt over his potential future crimes gnaw at me. No bounty, no matter how generous, could buy back a human life, regardless of how cheap the exchange was in the other direction. *Ah. Well, let's ignore those rare cases where people do come back from the dead, albeit...changed.*

An adventurer cannot falter when it comes to hunting down the crooked. A mountain of heads was a small price to pay if it saved at least as many lives. Just as these criminals put the value of their lives above others, I could stand firm in my assertion that the lives of those I protected were worth more. Can't fault that logic, can they?

I was impressed that Siegfried had managed to steel his own nerves. The way of the murderhobo came easy to a time-tested player character, but that was hardly the only way to get by in a world like this. There was room here for gore-shy peaceniks—just not in our line of work. Every adventurer gets their moment where their mettle is truly tested; his was upon him now. If he could keep his resolve up like this to the end, I'd be sure that that strength could carry him as far as he wanted to go.

I hadn't lied earlier when I'd said that the bandit was beyond saving. No good would come of us failing to see him through to the end. The bolt had hit him in a nasty spot—too bad, better luck next life. I'm not sure if it was Siegfried or me who had taken the shot, but from the stench of his bowels seeping out into the open air I could tell that no amount of medical aid would help him. Even slicing open his stomach, stitching his guts back together, and then cleaning it all up was a task that would only be possible at the best-equipped hospitals of my old world.

Before I'd found Siegfried, I myself had brought a swift end to two others and

taken their heads. One had wound up with a trampled sternum from falling under a horse's hooves; the shattered bone had pierced his lungs, and he'd been drowning in his own blood. The other had received a stray arrow just shy of his liver; he hadn't been long for this world either.

We had neither the duty nor the means to call in an emergency iatrurge to save their lives.

Phew, talk about dangerous. Sure, I'd had close calls with more than my fair share of contract killers and oath-bound assassins in my time with the madam after she'd received her new title, but it hadn't totally inured me to the simpler and more abundant perils of overland adventure.

The path to being a hero was a long one, paved with thorns.

"Chin up, Siegfried. No shame in claiming a bounty. So get a good grip on that head and treat it well."

I gave Siegfried a hearty pat on the back as I said this. He was holding the head as far as he could from his body, having made a bundle out of some clothes that had outlived their usefulness otherwise; no point keeping a corpse warm.

"It's proof that you prevented an otherwise inevitable tragedy. Be proud. At least give him the honor of the villain's role in your heroic tale."

If the dice had fallen differently it would be us decorating *their* banquet table. We would practically be doing the fools a service, casting them in their minor parts as we recalled our doings later. Even as he glared at me with his empty eyes from between the gaps in the cloth bundle, I wouldn't change my tune.

Don't get me wrong, I have no intention of proclaiming that what we were doing was right or just, but I do want to say that I was sure it wasn't *wrong*.

"Right, let's head back before they start worrying about us. We still need to find somewhere to camp out for the night."

"Yeah, got it," Siegfried replied after a pause.

I slung my arm over my fellow adventurer—no, my *comrade in arms*—and we made our triumphant return.

I won't really get into the fine details here—it's too petty an affair—but I found out later that Uzu had sped off like a jet at the first sign of danger, and for her, I had concocted a little revenge plot.

[Tips] It's easy to wrap up a story with the line "And then the defeated hoodlums gave up their evil ways and headed back home," but reality is not so kind. Staining your hands red with blood is only difficult the first time. Certain doors, once unlocked, will never shut so tightly again—regardless of one's efforts.

The boy who dreamed of being a hero sighed as he pushed down the urge to punch Goldilocks's face, inwardly vowing never to go on another job with the wretch.

"Heya, Siegfried. Fancy seeing you here."

Fancy seeing me here? They were both in the Association building—luck had nothing to do with it.

It had been a little while since returning to Marsheim from Siegfried's near-death experience. The report of his valiant efforts in helping to drive off the bandits had been filed a little late, but it had earned him an increase in rank. Unfortunately, it had also meant he was that much more likely to bump into his fellow newly minted ruby-red cohort.

A lingering memory of the events of that job came back to Siegfried, and he scrunched up his face in disgust—as if he'd bit down on an insect and felt it wriggle down the wrong pipe.

That twilight evening had terrified him—the arrows that had barely grazed him; the spears that had shredded his shirt sleeve; the warm splatter of blood. Above all else, he recalled gentle parting of flesh, the rasp of metal on bone, the heavy thud as the head of a man still clinging to life by a nail's hold fell to the ground.

All of these moments haunted his dreams. He would jolt awake in the night, while his closest friend could only look on in concern.

As time passed, Siegfried found his stride again, or something like it. But the memory of those silver coins in his hand, slick and shiny and cool like pooling blood in the moonlight—that would stay with him for good. He'd only been paid his fee for the contract; the bandit's bounty was still being processed.

"Hello, Erich, Margit."

"Hello to you too, Kaya."

Yet here Kaya was greeting both Goldilocks and the arachne girl. Siegfried couldn't stand the fact that his best friend had taken a liking to Goldilocks and his treacherous smile.

According to her, Erich had been awfully kind to her; he'd told her about all sorts of herbal concoctions that she'd never heard of. Seeing her talk about him with such high spirits made his blood boil. Ever since, the hot-blooded youth had made more efforts to prove himself before her and aimed to be even more chivalrous than before. Well, he had been carrying her things and whatnot beforehand, but a fire had been lit under him nonetheless. Siegfried wondered what the hell Goldilocks wanted.

A voice deep in his soul whispered to him that no good would come of associating with this aberration any longer.

All Siegfried wanted for the moment was to wrap up this pointless conversation and get back to finding his next gig—he still needed money.

If you were to ask Siegfried whether his new rank had brought with it an escape from abject poverty, he would answer with a firm and solemn *no*. He was still so poor that he needed to pad out the two portions of gruel that made up his three daily meals with wheat chaff. The caravan job had paid well, but its payment had been put aside for emergencies and wasn't something he'd dip into so easily.

After paying for the pair's lodging, their daily expenses, and the preparations needed for their jobs, his wallet contained nothing more than chump change.

And *of course* just the other day the handle of his beloved short spear would go and break.

The screwup had happened on a job a few days prior. Standing guard in a

canteen, Siegfried had spotted a drunk customer about to take a dangerous tumble. He had jumped in to help out, but...things don't always go to plan. Unable to bear the customer's weight, he'd rolled into the wall along with them. As Siegfried the Lucky would have it, the shaft of the short spear held under his armpit had found its way into a gap between the floor and the wall. Physics was not on his side; the spear he had owned ever since he had fled from his canton snapped in two.

Fortunately, Siegfried hadn't been utterly hapless; the head was fine. The shaft could be replaced quite easily, but for a young adventurer between paydays, it was quite the problem. He had quickly taken it to an equipment repair shop and been told that the fix would cost him twenty-five librae—an eye-watering sum that even the bandit's bounty and the caravan gig *combined* wouldn't cover.

Siegfried had felt the ground open up underneath his feet.

Yet his shock was little more than a reality check—such a price was to be expected to whittle a sturdy and high-quality shaft for his beloved spear.

There was a world of difference between him picking up some old stick and affixing it to the spear head and a professional's craftwork. Thinking it over, he realized the artisan had most likely deliberately lowballed his quote out of concern for a greenhorn adventurer.

A short spear was an essential for an adventurer climbing the ranks. Whether fighting in formation with other adventurers with a respect for the fundamentals or engaging with wild beasts, a weapon with some real reach proved indispensable.

In all honesty, it was far weirder to see people like Goldilocks go about with nothing but a sword and board.

Siegfried didn't want to bet his life on a fragile homemade shaft; he could accept no substitutions for real artisan work. Unfortunately, even at ruby-rank, the boring jobs would only net him one or two librae at best. Subtracting his basic cost of living, he didn't know how many months it would take to stock up enough cash to fix his spear. He was already testing the outer bounds of how long he could go between baths in the name of scraping together a few more

coins.

He could have sold the spoils of his nightmare gig, but Siegfried didn't want to part with either the sword or the armor. They would prove essential for any bodyguard jobs in the future, after all.

So naturally Erich's proposal was sweet as poison to Siegfried.

"Hear me out. I actually got a personal request to take on a bodyguard gig. You remember our little run-in with the bandits on that job we did together, right? Well, the story's made the rounds with a bunch of convoys, and now I'm sitting on a little job that pays one libra and fifty assarii per day. They were wondering if Siegfried the Lucky would also like to lend his aid."

One libra and fifty assarii?! Siegfried almost jumped back in surprise at the sum. Regular bodyguard jobs for a ruby-red adventurer averaged out to about fifty assarii per day—hardly ideal. And that was before food and other costs had been factored in.

Yet this proposition was *three times* the going rate—about what you would expect from the next rank up, with all the expectations of skill that that would imply. Siegfried supposed that Goldilocks had received the offer because his prospective employers had realized that an amber-orange adventurer with some leverage could negotiate the asking price up to two or three librae, and so had settled for an easily placated ruby-red who could punch above their weight class, so to speak.

It was an alluring proposition. Each day would pay out what would usually take three days to earn. Not only that, he wouldn't have to pay for lodgings while out on the road; depending on the schedule, he could actually *save* some money.

"H-How long's it for and where would it be going?"

He could scarcely think for all the alarm bells going off inside his head, but the *money*—his lips were already moving faster than his brain.

At the name of a nearby satellite state and the news that they would be out until the end of autumn, logic and reason, already barely hanging on, were given a bullish shove out of the spotlight by greed and expedience. Before he

even knew what he was doing, Siegfried found himself shaking Erich's outstretched hand.

"Amazing. It's reassuring to have you along for the ride."

Siegfried easily put aside this disingenuous comment and tamped down his reticence. He *literally* couldn't afford to say no. Siegfried put on an unconvincing smile in return.

"Don't worry too much—it's a big operation this time: seven carriages and ten of the caravan's private bodyguards. They're hiring a few other self-employed folk, so the operation might even reach three figures! I'm certain that we won't have to do any real work while we're on the road."

Hearing these figures put Siegfried's heart at ease. Ten professional bodyguards meant that the caravan must have been pretty well equipped. It wasn't a ragtag group of scrubs who'd only earned the job title with the swords dangling from their waists. What's more, they'd have real numbers and more Association muscle on their side.

Now, the promise of safety in numbers had left Siegfried with a false sense of security last time—he could admit this. But this was *way* bigger; what was there to worry about? Only the vocally suicidal would dare attack a caravan troupe of that size.

It would take the most audacious and fearsome of marauders, backed by a literal *army* of brigands, to dare the approach.

"You don't need to worry at all, Sieg. At this time of year, the roads will be busy with carriages delivering land taxes; tax payments in transit means *big* patrols; big patrols mean all the bandits go to ground for the season. Plus, we're a capable team, so there's nothing to fear."

With the announcement that they would be departing next week, Siegfried made his preparations to hit the road. The journey would span the end of autumn and early winter, so he would need more supplies than usual. Blizzards were rare in these parts, but it still got awfully cold; he would need warm blankets.

Siegfried envisioned that he probably wouldn't need his short spear on a

ruby-red job; he decided to send it in for repairs once they were back. The new sword on his belt would be enough to play the part.

“What good timing, huh, Dee?” said Kaya.

Siegfried couldn't help but reciprocate her smile—after taking the time to give her hell for not calling him Siegfried, of course.

When they were back he would have enough money to get his spear fixed—no, he could afford to get something a bit *better*, with an iron core, maybe! *Hmm*, he thought, *although Kaya's robe is getting a bit worse for wear, so how about I buy her some new cloth?* Kaya had a talent for needlework; she could work something out if she had the materials. Siegfried made a mental note to buy her something in her favorite shade of chartreuse.

Siegfried set to avidly counting his unhatched chickens—completely ignorant that the hand he'd shaken dripped pure venom. Yes, he was still unaware, and all the better for it. The time would come soon enough when his blissful ignorance would crumble under a storm of sword edges, arrow tips, and streaming tears.

Consider for a moment an adventurer's lot—locked in a mutual death grip with your own misfortunes like the worst of lovers, driven back to your lowest lows to keep food on the table, good gear at your side, and your rank on an upward trajectory, all to build a résumé that meant nothing outside the business. To the average civilian you amounted to little more than a hired hand, a thug, a gangster. And should you *quit*—what more would be left for you?

Between protracted abjection and a moment's brush with death for the sake of a grand task, any adventurer would choose the latter.

And so Siegfried smiled, envisioning his lavish reward.

And so Siegfried would scream and wail that this wasn't what he wanted.

But through it all, Siegfried wouldn't break. His silly pride, the childish dreams he kept in a death grip—they would keep him intact.

The world was not so kind a place that everyone could live with a broad smile across their face every day of their lives.

[Tips] The price of weapons is decided by the market. Therefore, trying to procure one on the front lines of a battle through honest means comes at a steep cost.

Selling a sword that one has acquired to the Artisans' Guild requires formal proof of its legal provenance. However, weapons stripped from a bandit or taken as spoils of war are exempt from this rule.

As the harvest wrapped up and the end of autumn crept closer, the roads bustled with carriages. Tax season was upon us—not just in the Empire, but all over.

I remember back in Japan, the historical dramas never ran short of scenes of starving commoners slinging heavy bales of rice on their shoulders to offer up to the shogunate, but here in Rhine all of the annual tribute was shipped off in one go, for efficiency's sake.

In the larger administrative states, huge convoys carrying the land tax over miles and miles were just part of the autumn tableau.

But in the distant reaches of Marsheim, thanks to a lack of administrative cohesion and a lack of manpower—this wasn't a numbers problem, it was more the difficulty of finding people that could be *trusted*—the carriages delivering the land tax were accompanied by patrol knights, high-level adventurers, and trustworthy mercenaries.

“All righty then, let's get this show on the road! You guys have a trustworthy rep to ya, after all!”

Thanks to Nanna's information network, word had spread that we were capable adventurers as good as any amber-orange but for a fraction of the price. This was the busiest time of year and everyone was short on hands; it was all but inevitable that we'd find ourselves part of a bodyguard entourage.

The purpose of this trip around the peripheries was to sell excess crops and goods to the cantons who'd requested it. We had gathered around the planner of this entire operation, but the one talking to the crowd was a huge adventurer—a nemea.

He had bronze skin, a chestnut mane, a muscular figure, and the severe resting expression of your typical nemea. Many mensch couldn't tell them apart, but I didn't have too much trouble distinguishing this handsome gentleman from his kin.

“Are you kidding me?! That's Gattie from Mwenemutapa! It's *the* Heavy Tusk Gattie! And his freakin' concubines too!”

“I-I g-get it, Siegfried. I c-can see him, so stop moving so much!”

Young Siegfried, usually so angry to be seen as a party member of mine of late, sat atop my shoulders, rocking violently. He was quite literally starstruck.

Heavy Tusk Gattie was a famous hero around these parts and a copper-green adventurer.

He'd earned his sobriquet for the tusk of a mankwa—a type of demihuman that had evolved separately from elephants in the Southern Continent—that hung from his neck. I was impressed with his PR skills. We only had our names to get us ahead in this business, after all. It was important to have something stand out about your appearance so anyone would know it was you even from afar.

Gattie had earned fame for single-handedly quashing the incursion of the mankwa people from the southern continent, who had set their sights on the prosperous Trialist Empire of Rhine.

Nemea were famed even among humanfolk for their toughness, but the mankwa put even them to shame. They were the southern continent's equivalent to ogres, boasting heights of over three meters, allowing them to go toe-to-toe with callistians in a wrestling match. By and large they were mild-mannered folk, but those few mankwa with a taste for new enemies to flatten and greater feats of strength to boast of had a way of finding each other and *organizing*.

Gattie had followed this particular crew of mankwa bullies out of the southern continent with his party—the five women who formed his entourage.

Nemean family structures paralleled those of actual lions; the women outnumbered their men and handled most of the day-to-day labor of keeping

the family fed and intact. You couldn't underestimate a nemea woman just because the man might cut a more dramatic profile to human eyes. They refined their individual skills to fine and *lethal* points. At any moment, a nemea woman was expected to fight on the behalf of her whole pride and commit to deadly tasks with the dread certainty of a trusted executioner.

Gattie's party was a group of honed fighters centered around this frontliner.

I wondered about Leopold of the Bloody Manes. Had he been the only nemea in his party because he simply couldn't *get any*, especially with hunks like Gattie on the market? I decided not to dwell on this too much longer...

"Anyway, you can leave everything to us. As long as we're around, you can strip off your armor and throw your spears to the ground!"

Gattie's party had just happened to bump into our parade on the road, and as he'd quite literally roared out, it seemed he was happy to join our group. His party had a similar role to ours, but with more importance—the land tax they were guarding was to be sent to the government. The knight who was nominally in charge of that procession stood by his side, but it was evident that Gattie had all the power here.

Jeez, it really is like the Wild West out here.

"Erich, ERICH! You think I can go ask to shake his hand?! He's a living legend and we *just happen* to be on the same job as him? What are the odds?!"

"All right, all right, just calm down already. You're gonna make me bite my tongue. You can do what you like. If this is revenge for something, then I'm sorry, okay?"

I hadn't realized Siegfried was such a fanboy. Well, I'd surmised from his choice of borrowed name that he loved hero stories and sagas, but seeing him lose his composure so completely around the newest big name in the industry spoke to a deeper fascination.

Personally I couldn't help but feel my own excitement at this whole team-up wither away. It wasn't any particular fault of Gattie's. I'm sure he was plenty strong. You couldn't luck your way to copper-green, and I could tell he could *pop off* if he wanted. As my senior in the adventuring biz, I respected him, sure.

The thing that bothered me was the knight next to Gattie. The emblem on the banner he was holding was markedly off from the Imperial house style. This operation was being run by a strongman looking to avoid any local strife and safely huddle under the power of the Empire. This put a damper on my ability to fully trust him. Not only that, the knight's active choice *not* to stand out bugged me.

On top of that, the fact that the bodyguard complement had been padded out so overwhelmingly with adventurers made me think that if they were so keen on keeping their purse strings tight, they should have just plonked a bunch of mannequins around the caravans and been done with it.

If you tried to assemble such a shabby procession in Ubiorum, I was sure the person responsible would have their territory seized before they were executed.

Come on, keep it together, Margrave Marsheim... Welcoming enemies into the fold while suppressing any personal ambition? Ugh, it reminds me of poor ol' Tokugawa... One could only hope that the knight's sponsor would fare better than the mankwa invaders had.

But still... *But still...* As someone who worked for an Imperial noble, even if only for a little while, it made me sad, man.

You call yourself a knight of Rhine?! Pull up those bootstraps! Fix that eyesore of a banner! At least put some effort into coming up with a more apt motto of your own! Don't just recycle an old one!

Wow, where did all this righteous anger come from? I kind of wanted to whip out my signet ring right here and now. Was the situation really that desperate? Not in the slightest. But the whole situation wound me up all the same.

Calm yourself, Erich, I thought. Nothing will come of spilling unnecessary intel and causing a big old fuss. If rumors start spreading that the tentacles of a certain magus in a high place have reached the peripheries, then what kind of bone-chilling complaint do you think you'll get from Lady Agrippina? The thought was enough to make my stomach churn. Push down that anger and keep a cool expression. There we go.

The difficulties of life out here in the western reaches of the Empire helped

the people here make a living, in a perverse kind of way. Let's just let it slide.

A hero whose name lined the pages of sagas had announced that he would lead the charge, and all we needed to do was stick close to the caravans and let him do his job. Our eighty-head convoy had quadrupled in size now that we were playing remora to this shark. With the Imperial flag above us and Gattie's heroic name, we had the sort of immense might that would halt any suicidal fool in their tracks.

Rhine was a big place, but I doubted there were many who would dare launch an attack on such a gargantuan operation.

Good luck, assholes! I'm behind seven proxies!

I wasn't sure why my memories of ancient internet tough guy memes decided to pick *now* of all times to resurface. I couldn't help feeling that I'd raised some kind of flag. No. Must be my imagination. Right? Yeah. Surely.

Come on, Erich, you gotta be more optimistic about life! Look—you've made enough of a name for yourself as an adventurer that you've earned the trust and respect of both the Association manager and the noble community! It's the whole reason you got this job! This is a great way to boost your name even more. Talk about a great opportunity. Yeah?

Siegfried came bouncing back after shaking hands with a real-life hero in the flesh; now with our new convoy, the carriages finally started to move.

Whether the elites were positioned at the front or back, you could always be sure on these bodyguard jobs that *somebody*—usually a lot of somebodies—would fill the role of “expendable mook.” So in the one in a hundred—no, one in a *million*—chance that we were attacked, our assigned carriage would take up the front of the line. In the worst-case scenario, we could buy some time until the main unit could come and bail us out.

“He was massive! Not just tall, he was so beefy! Man, Kaya, you totally should've come to say hi too!”

“I was fine not seeing him. But lucky you, Dee, he even gave you a hug around the shoulders!”

“Yeah! Talk about awesome!”

Siegfried couldn't keep a lid on his excitement as he chatted on about Gattie to Kaya, but it was clear that she wasn't a fan of guys with such rustic charm. Or maybe this is just how girls behaved when a boy their age got overexcited.



“So that’s a copper-green adventurer, eh,” Margit said.

“Mm, adventurer rank is decided not just by your work, but also your own personal qualities.”

“You say that, but I don’t think you would even need Mister Fidelio to take them all on. I bet even Miss Laurentius could easily—”

“Margit, shh!”

Dude, if they heard you, they would not be happy!

I mean, I get it, everyone loves playing a little “let’s you and him fight” in their head. As a lover of the sagas, I was hardly in any position to judge.

Just like my brother Hans, my personal fave was the wandering Sir Carsten. Sir Carsten had incurred the wrath of a god—the details vary, but the traditionally accepted common point is that he fell in love with an apostle at first sight and made some moves—and went on a journey of penance that took him far abroad. When he finally received his atonement, he had become unstoppable.

Sir Carsten had innumerable tales written about him, and they were all classics. Even putting aside my favoritism toward perfectly self-sufficient adventurers, in my book he still stood head and shoulders above the rest.

It was, uh, pretty obvious who Siegfried’s favorite hero was, so whenever we bantered about heroes and legends, I avoided the usual “who’d beat who” discourse.

It was not unlike having a favorite baseball team. I dare you to go to my hometown of Osaka and tell everyone there that your favorite team is the Giants. Find a particularly patriotic Kansai person and you might come away bruised and swimming with the fishes in Dotonbori canal before sundown.

Jokes aside, when you started to compare living adventurers, you risked genuinely raising some hackles. Nemea weren’t famed for their hearing, but if anyone who worked under Gattie heard us we’d be branded as ungracious newbies.

I had felt what Margit had felt too. Even if Gattie’s entire party came together and made their best showing, Miss Laurentius alone was far stronger. And if I

took them on? Well, even without all of my gear and magic, I think I could just about come out on top.

I'm sure everyone has met an actor who looked way more handsome in photos and been like, "Huh, you're...not as good-looking in person." This was a similar thing.

Cutting the guy some slack, there were people whose entire demeanor did a one-eighty when things got hairy, and I fit under that umbrella too. In fact, nearly every person who'd ever truly scared the bejeezus out of me didn't look the part at first glance; who could say—maybe Gattie had hidden depths.

Whatever, I thought. Let's just be grateful that his strength is on our side. Oughta be a piece of cake.

[Tips] As an adventurer climbs the ranks, it becomes more difficult to quantify their strength. Some adventurers might have earned their rank for a single overwhelming talent; others might have no redeeming qualities of their own. Personal merit is hardly the only factor at play in an adventurer's promotion. For example, some adventurers find themselves quickly pushed up the ladder for their impeccable behavior when dealing with noble clients.

On the other hand, there are also heartless adventurers who have soared up the rankings based on the indomitable power to crush all in their way.

Hey, Erich? You know how you were totally not worried? Yeah, I've got some bad news for you.

In the three days since we joined up with the caravan carrying the land tax, we had been keeping watch in a six-division system—four hours each, in other words—with a lot of sleep and rests. I'd really appreciated the convenience of moving in such a big group. But now we were dealing with an issue in direct proportion to the scale of our operation.

We had reached a particularly hilly region—the bumps and occasional rising and falling of the land looked almost like an egg carton—where a snaking road carved its way through the hills at their base. It was far easier to build and cross a road like this than a straight one that went up and down in line with the hills.

I could understand the thought process of those who built it and those who were traveling down it, but man this kind of terrain was *hell* for a bodyguard. The top of a hill provided a great view, but down here on the road you could barely see a thing. Not only that, the number of bends meant that our caravans wouldn't be able to turn around easily in the event of an attack, and trying to escape up any of the hillsides would prove quite difficult.

An area like this was akin to a deathtrap for a large-scale caravan operation like ours. Once we were halfway through and our pace had slowed due to the winding nature of the road, it would be easy to block us off at both ends. If we found ourselves in a pincer, we would be more helpless than a caged bird—ready to sing for the enemy or be crushed.

Our stratagem was to send scouts ahead, maintaining constant vigilance for bandits in the gaps in the terrain. It was a bodyguard's duty to map out what lay in front of the client's course and develop countermeasures accordingly.

Our group was too big to keep constantly in full view. At this size, inevitably the left hand would struggle to know what the right was up to.

"Holy moly..." I said.

"Seeing them be so brazen is almost a breath of fresh air," Margit replied.

Yes, as my sterling luck would have it, we had bumped into a group who had blocked off our narrow strip of road.

A number of abatises had been laid out with just enough space to fit a horse between them. At the far end, soldiers lay in wait with spears raised, while the rest of the complement was stationed in the hills. And finally, there was a whole squadron of cavalry posted a bit farther up the sides to lead a surprise charge at a moment's notice.

This was no mere bandit gang. This was a bona fide *army*—*a hundred fighters, minimum*.

"Margit, go report back. I'll stay here and keep watch. And if anything happens..."

"You'll use magic to let me know, right? Understood, I'll get going."

I watched my partner, who had been observing the scene by my side, head off before I sank into the earth with a heavy sigh.

This was *not* good. I already didn't like the sheer size of this crew, but the *banner* they were flying was even worse news.

"The Infernal Knight, Jonas Baltlinden."

Upon the bloodstained war flag that these bandits had raised was an emblem depicting the heads of two wyverns holding up a single shield.

It was the flag of Jonas Baltlinden, infamous around these parts as the Infernal Knight, the Reprobate, the Traitor.

The emblem originally belonged to Jonas's master's house of Mars-Baden—in other words, it belonged to a Baden, a distant relative of the Rhinian imperial house. One of them had most likely seen promise in Jonas's abilities and had sent him to quell the unruly peripheries.

However, this troop did not belong to his house, that of Baron Jotzheim. After all, the family had been slain by Jonas himself—the very knight they had appointed.

Jonas had slaughtered his own master in a fit of rage over having been scolded for his behavior. The baron had discovered that Jonas had been ruling his appointed canton with an iron fist and had flown into a rage at his tyranny. However, this only made whatever emotions Jonas had been holding in check snap.

Jonas drew his sword there and then and cut down Baron Jotzheim and his entourage in cold blood. Unsatisfied with this, he killed the baron's wife, his three sons, his two daughters, and all of his servants. Evidently still unsatisfied, he then went to the baron's other home and murdered his favorite concubine and their children.

Over two nights, he murdered forty-five people.

This was naught more than the beginning of his blood-soaked, traitorous path. Afterward, along with his seven most loyal underlings, he diminished his former house's remaining military might and expanded his own sphere of influence. The army that stood before me was the fruits of his labor.

There was no counting the cantons he'd raided, no imagining the great heap of corpses to his name. He was a fiend of the worst sort, happy to drown the highways and byways of Rhine in blood to slake his greed.

How had such a heinous figure managed to do as he pleased for so long? It wasn't because people were turning a blind eye, like with the Baldur Clan or the Heilbronn Familie. The Empire had, in fact, moved into action; they wouldn't endure having mud—no, *shit* was more appropriate—slung in their faces. A whopping fifty-drachma bounty had been put up for Jonas if he was brought in *dead*. Naturally many adventurers and mercenaries had tried to claim it and even a margrave or two had mobilized their private forces against him.

Their prey was still here after all this time for a single reason.

None had returned from the attempt alive. Just like Baron Jotzheim, not a *single person* had encountered Jonas and survived.

Jonas was one of the top three most deadly figures in these parts. I had no clue why this living calamity had put himself in our path. Maybe he'd settled here because the land was suitable. Maybe his base was nearby. Or maybe he'd heard rumors about caravans stocked to the rafters with land tax.

Whatever the reason, we were in hot water.

The true strength of a large convoy lies in its ability to ward off attackers. However, that strength means nothing in the face of someone with the cojones to ignore it. In an actual combat situation, our baggage and our noncombatants put us at a firm disadvantage.

With our numbers, if we attempted a retreat, we'd risk a fatal crowd collapse. Not only that, our bodyguards were spread out, which meant that if our enemies came at us all at once our numbers would be no help at all. We would be picked off one by one like teeth from a comb.

The overwhelming aura coming from our opponents was giving me shivers. It wasn't just the size of their force; I could sense that their morale was running high.

I thought back to my home's Watch. Sir Lambert's capable leadership meant that even the most lowly gaggle of foot soldiers gave off a vigor that

outstripped their ability and they could draw out their latent strength. I'd been one of them; I knew what it felt like firsthand.

But the morale that I could sense from this bunch wasn't that feeling of "We can win because our leader is strong."

It was tainted with fear. This was an army that had had the *fear of god* prodding at their backs. They were too petrified by the shapeless, nameless horror awaiting them if they screwed up to flinch or retreat. Such was the might of Jonas Baltlinden.

What to do... We'd come too far to make a detour now. Even I had gotten lax under the safety net of our perceived numerical advantage. We should've sent scouts hours or days ahead, not mere minutes out.

If we had, the pointed failure of the scouting party to return would have sent the message loud and clear.

I could try and do this solo and clear the way in front, I thought. Gah, but I can't let anyone see me use magic... No, no, that's not important right now—if I don't do something everybody's going to die!

Time is ticking away while I worry. Just as the thought came into mind, I heard screams coming from the other side of the hill.

Oh you absolute pieces of shit... Of course they'd had a detachment come up behind us. They had waited until the scouts went ahead, then sent their people to target our rear.

Other scouts who had spread out in the surrounding area used bonfires to keep an eye on the caravan, but they were too small and too weak. Of *course* I couldn't have been the only one who'd slacked off a little on the assumption that this was going to be a milk run.

My luck had really bottomed out. I was certain Margit would have spotted any bandits lying in wait; I must have gone to the one spot where they *weren't* hiding.

A clash had already broken out behind me. At this rate, the horses would start to panic, bolt off with their carriages in tow, and crash into the carefully laid trap here.

I knew I had a bad feeling, but I didn't want something to *actually happen!*

I gave Castor a kick, and we dashed off at full speed. I needed to get back to the head of the procession and make sure they didn't fall straight into the enemy's jaws...

[Tips] Jonas Baltlinden is a mensch from Marsheim who serves no master. Once upon a time, his overwhelming martial might earned him a knighthood, but he was unable to quell his violent nature. Climbing to the heights of infamy as the Infernal Knight, he commits such devastation that many have come to fear him as a calamity personified.

Siegfried favored the sword, as it was his heroic namesake's weapon of choice. Countless adventures and stalwart allies under his belt, the original Siegfried had eventually come up against the devourer of corpses, the blood guzzler, the Foul Drake Fafnir. To slay this horrid beast, Siegfried had obtained Windslaught, a mystic blade and sacred treasure. The young adventurer was completely in awe at how it could cut down all evil that stood in the great hero's way.

However, Siegfried had started to think recently that the sword wasn't well suited to him.

"Hrah!"

The incoming blood-drenched spearhead glistened in the midday sun.

"Dammit!"

The target was his lower stomach. The waist was an exposed spot for a well-aimed frontal attack, even with the safety of armor—the smallest of gaps could be used to strike at the soft flesh underneath.

This was something he had learned while training with the Watch: a thrust will almost always be for the stomach, so twist out of the way. This knowledge and his training saved Siegfried's life in that moment.

Siegfried struck at the incoming spear and managed to swipe it out of the way before it made contact. Siegfried's strike hit true, but the resounding clack and

the painful feedback that ran through his arm told him that the spear hadn't snapped. The foe's weapon didn't have a solid iron core, but Siegfried had failed to break it. He had been too absorbed in saving his skin to strike at the right angle.

Siegfried chided himself. His swordplay absolutely paled in comparison to how Goldilocks had performed during their training.

Complaining that the Watch didn't force its recruits to perform all-out combat or that they didn't teach him enough about swordplay hadn't been on the cards earlier this morning, but in an actual skirmish it was evident that his experience with the sword was lacking. The sword wasn't to blame, of course. Even this dime-a-dozen blade was leagues above the last one, a piece of steel so chipped and ragged it would have been better suited to sawing logs.

I'm just not good enough!

Siegfried gritted his teeth and forced his body to move how it had been trained. He followed through on his swipe and twisted the sword around to grab the blade in his gauntleted left hand in a half-sword stance. His foe was dazed at having his weapon deflected, and so Siegfried charged right at him.

This was the biggest weakness of spears. They could strike, swipe, and smack from a safe distance, but you needed to control their weight and balance. If you were caught unawares and had your weapon smacked out of its trajectory, it could take precious moments to recover.

As his foe flailed helplessly, Siegfried flung himself at the bandit with enough ready force to send both of them tumbling to the ground.

This wasn't something he had learned with the Watch. This was something Goldilocks had taught him in a one-on-one training session.

The enemy bandit was clad in a shocking amount of armor, from head to foot. He had a sturdy breastplate, tough cloth armor, a helmet, and leg guards. Although none of his armor was particularly sturdy, it would take a talented warrior to cut through right to the flesh.

That's why Siegfried was going for the brute force method. The bandit still needed to *see*; his helmet, in concession to this fundamental need, had a nice

wide-open gap right in the middle. Rushing forward, Siegfried put all of his strength into planting his sword into the bandit's face.

“Bweh...”

What came out of the poor fool's mouth wasn't a shout of pain; rather, Siegfried's strike had forced all the air from his lungs. As the bandit dropped his spear and collapsed to the floor, the young adventurer didn't hesitate to drive his sword right into the bandit's exposed nether regions.

“Gweep?!”

This time he let out a scream. It was no surprise—after all, his crown jewels and the many blood vessels that supplied it had been neatly separated.

The space between the legs was another guaranteed thin point in a suit of armor. As the man fell to the ground, Siegfried struck the killing blow. The stories of the Eastern Conquest told by the veterans back in Illfurth must have settled into his heart, for their echoes were present in his fighting style.

Come on, man...This is not easy to handle! Talk about difficult balance!

Siegfried, in no position to rest on his laurels now, had still chosen to sheathe his relatively new partner and was weighing up the dead man's long spear. He gave it a quick, gliding practice jab—right at the back of the skull of a bandit about to strike down an innocent merchant.

That was a satisfying sound—the heavy thud of iron giving way to steel.

Spears were famed for their piercing abilities, but there were times when the heavy butt was the more preferable end to use when the spearhead wouldn't be able to strike true. A helmet does its best, but a firm, solid strike with the blunt end of the spear can deal quite the shock. It might not have the power to kill, but it has enough strength to neutralize for a moment.

As the bandit fell to his knees, Siegfried took no time in stabbing the fool's exposed waist.

“Urgh...!”

The usual groan came out as the spear found its target. Siegfried felt the push of chain mail underneath the cloth armor, but the spear still ruptured the man's

insides before he pulled his weapon free.

His second kill of the day.

“D...Dee!”

“Oy, Kaya! Get back in the carriage! Hide yourself before a stray arrow finds you!”

Siegfried’s personal victory was quite handsome, but around him it was an absolute mess.

Three rounds of indiscriminate arrow rain had come from the foothills. If the extent of the attack was enough to wreak havoc on the bodyguards who had expected an easy job due to safety in numbers, the onslaught that came afterward sealed the deal.

No one around Siegfried had an ounce of fight left in them. They were being mowed down by a wall of thirty enemy bandits. Siegfried wasn’t fighting back because of an organized front against his foes, but because simple dumb luck had left him entirely untouched.

That, and because he knew now just how easy it is for people to die.

“Surround ’im! He ain’t complete a waster—keep your guards up!”

“Gah ha ha! You can piss your pants and run off home to mommy if ya like, stinkin’ brat!”

“Yeah, yer back just paints us a bigger target!”

The bandits had initially gone for any old target near them, but with the caravan’s numbers thinning, they all approached Siegfried.

There weren’t enough of them to make a spear wall, but three spears against one wasn’t good odds. Not only that, these dirty bastards had experience working as a team. Siegfried could tell that they wouldn’t all strike at once; they would time their thrusts to get that surefire kill. The first hit could be blocked or evaded. However, the other two spears held at the ready would be waiting to skewer him as soon as he stopped moving.

There were two ways out of this hell of spears: the strongarm method, where you swiped away multiple attacks at once, or the light-footed method, where

you dipped and dived out of harm's way.

Siegfried knew overexerting himself would lead to death, and so he gripped his spear and readied himself to defend. He struck at the first spear—the man in the center's—to send it clashing into the spear to his left, then steeled himself to receive the spear that came from his right. It glided off his gauntlet—had Kaya not tweaked the length it covered, the blow would have been agonizing.

And so he was gifted the next moment to breathe.

However, his foes were still there. He had survived a moment longer, but...

“GROAAAAAR!”

All of a sudden an earsplitting war cry, so loud that Siegfried wanted to toss down his weapon and cover his ears, came thundering across the battlefield. The bandits froze for a moment too, seemingly worried that their eardrums had burst...before being rent into mincemeat in the next moment.

A giant battle-axe wheeled through the air like a tornado, heaving the bandit spearmen off their feet.

“Stay calm and form up around me! Any who can't fight, flee to safety!”

Siegfried had only managed to prolong his life for a few seconds, but this was long enough to save it—hearing the sound of battle, Gattie and his party had rushed onto the scene.

The valiant nemea had come through for the newbie adventurer who had asked him earlier for a handshake. As he let out another war cry, his axe pulled itself out of a pile of stinking meat that had once been a bandit and flew back into his hand.

The axe's enchantment bound it to the bracelet on Gattie's wrist, such that it would come and fly forth at his clangorous beck and call.

Of course, whoever had done the enchanting hadn't been able to turn it into a remote-controlled death machine; it simply followed the inexorable pull of the nemea's great well of power. All the same, it soared gracefully back into his huge hand.

In the next moment, a boom like the earth itself had shattered rattled the sky. With huge claws drawn, Gattie bounded across the battlefield in a flash of true leonine prowess, pouncing into the fray.

“Eep?!”

“Fragile thing!”

The bandit’s spear, raised in weak defiance, shattered into pieces under the nemea’s battle-axe, the follow-through striking the poor fool’s helmet, then smashing into the bandit’s shoulder plate down into his chest.

The bandits’ one-sided assault was turned completely on its head as Gattie and his party ripped through them. Gattie’s war cry had planted the seed of fear into all their hearts and dulled their movements.

Spearplay that had been trained to a deadly level was rendered useless, their points unable to strike through flesh, before the battle-axe’s return strike shattered life after life with all the ease in the world.

One blow apiece sent bandit after bandit flying into their graves, without care for kith or the weapon they held—even the daunting callistian leading the rear guard, heavy war hammer in hand, was felled in moments. The finishing blow came not long after.

“Holy hell... He’s incredible.”

“Show some nerve, you bags of meat!”

Siegfried’s murmur and Gattie’s cry couldn’t be more at odds with one another. Siegfried was in utter shock at the sight of a legend in the flesh; Gattie just bemoaned the shameful lack of challenge.

Perhaps these bandits’ allies had cottoned on from the screams and cries that their fellows had been all but decimated. Another volley of arrows rained down, but this was of no concern to Gattie—he simply hauled the huge callistian above him and used the corpse as a shield.

“So...that’s how a true hero fights...”

Siegfried, anticipating the imminent rain of death, had sneaked under a carriage for safety. His fear turned into admiration.

He's strong. He's so damn strong.

A fire had been kindled in Siegfried's heart. He was encouraged—*if he's around I'll survive this thing!* What was more, he wished to one day become like him. No, more than a wish—he *promised* himself he would become that strong. As the volley drew to an end, Siegfried pulled himself out from under the carriage.

Perhaps five rounds of arrows had been enough, or maybe they had simply grown tired, for the archers on the hillside didn't strike again.

"They're lacking... Something's off. These aren't the numbers you'd expect to attack a convoy of our size."

Gattie muttered to himself as he tossed the callistian pincushion to the ground. His five concubines, who had just about finished off dispatching the other foot soldiers, concurred.

Their numbers, their equipment, and their skill far outclassed your average roadside robber, but it definitely wasn't the level you would expect from a group who were so ready to attack such a large parade.

"Which means we set our sights on what's ahead, huh..."

Just as Gattie was organizing his thoughts, Goldilocks burst onto the scene, shouting at the top of his lungs: "Stop the caravan! There's a trap a...head...?"

Perhaps it was because he had galloped here at full speed screaming the whole way, but his voice deflated as soon as he saw the pools of blood all around. He looked almost *disappointed* that the battle was already over.

"Aha, the bodyguard boy from the other caravan! Tell me—what's ahead?"

"Yes, sir! It's a death trap! Infantry and cavalry are hiding in the hills, and the road ahead is blocked off with an abatis and even more foot soldiers!"

"Hmm, then the best course of action would be to turn around..."

"I've alerted the knight in charge of your squad and he is giving out the order already!"

"Indeed. No, wait a second, boy."

Gattie held out a hand to stop Erich as he stroked his mane with the other, deep in thought.

If we turn around now, he thought, then the enemy will immediately know that the forces sent to stop us here have been defeated. After all, if we never show up, then they would naturally assume they had lost. Not only that, the archers on the hill are probably rushing off to tell their boss that the ambush failed.

If we try to turn around here—slowed down by our reduced numbers and the injured—then we'll just be ripped to shreds. It won't take more than ten minutes for them to either realize something is wrong or for their allies to safely deliver a report.

In that case, a safe escape with the injured and the corpses will be impossible, and even if we were to abandon anyone, it wouldn't make much difference. To top that off, I expect that their cavalry will come and rush us. This would only buy them time for their foot soldiers to close the gap while we're wasting ours.

Not only that, it's not as if this is some war epic. Leaving a few dozen of our bravest to fight off the pursuers as the caravan journeys off toward safety simply isn't an option.

Gattie couldn't justify leaving so many to die; three librae for a finished job was hardly worth the sacrifice. If this had been a true mercenary crew bought and paid for to crush this enemy specifically, they could rationalize holing up here to buy time, but everyone here was a volunteer trying to make a living.

"All right. We've got one option—move forward and crush them all!"

"Hold on, Sir Gattie! I saw their flag—it bears the crest of a shield and two wyverns!"

"Oho?"

Siegfried could only cock his head in confusion at this description, but it seemed that Gattie knew exactly what Goldilocks was talking about.

There could be no doubt; the crest of Baron Jotzheim, immortalized as a symbol of treason itself, was a flag none would dare appropriate for their own ends. Who would dare invoke such infamy? Who would risk the ire of Jonas

himself, who had already slain so many for daring to falsely swindle or pillage in his name?

Jonas viewed everyone else as mere prey. If he did not, then he would not have amassed an army of this size or have the gall to attack caravans laden with land tax secured for the Empire.

“So our enemy today is the Infernal Knight, eh? That’s all the more reason we can’t turn tail. His men have killed enough of our own, and his hands are stained with the blood of countless others. He must be made to atone.”

“...Are we forming an assault unit?”

“Quite right! We will gather those here ahead who can still move! How many are we arrayed against?”

“I reckon a hundred and fifty! It won’t be an easy fight—they have the terrain advantage, and there’s more archers still lying in wait in the hills.”

“We’ve got a few with shields, but I doubt we can count on a shield wall.”

The shield formation, also known as testudo or tortoise formation, involves many soldiers gathering together to form a literal wall with their shields in order to protect the unit from incoming arrows. Due to its mobility and the speed at which it could be assembled, the Trialist Empire of Rhine favored the spear wall over its shielded counterpart, leading it to fall out of favor in official military settings. However, it was still in use among small groups, such as adventuring parties who wanted to protect their flanks while sustaining a forward assault.

Obviously one shield wasn’t enough to protect your entire body, but creating a patchwork of shields and marching in unison was a little too difficult for an impromptu unit. Unless everyone was in sync, people would start to march out of order. It would be almost preferable to simply rush across the battlefield instead.

“E-Excuse me!” Siegfried raised a trembling voice. “M-My friend Kaya—she can use magic.”

“O-Oh! Yes, I have magic that can...block arrows.”

“You do, eh?”

Kaya was a mage, yes, but her wheelhouse wasn't in the reality-altering craft. To make up for this, she had worked hard at perfecting potions that could replicate and sustain spell effects. She had seen her friend-turned-adventurer jolt awake from nightmares enough times to convince her that she needed to expand her portfolio into *combat* potions as well.

When she'd told Erich of her worries, the gold-haired adventurer had given her a few tips—recipes that would shine on the battlefield, and how best to use them. He had given a gentlemanly smile as he broke down the details of these ghastly concoctions, and Kaya had chosen to accept his aid without regret or hesitation. She would have done anything to save the one person in this world that she wanted to be with forever.

“This potion redirects arrows. Simply apply it to yourself and any arrows fired with ill intent will miss their mark.”

“It doesn't use wind, eh?”

Gattie was caught off guard by the potion's mechanism. He had stood on many a battlefield with mage cohorts who had fought in the thick of things; he thought he'd seen every trick in the book when it came to enchanting an ally's missiles and abjuring the enemy's. Such spells had always indirectly controlled their targets' trajectories by manipulating the air; this was on a completely different level. He doubted that even most battle-hardened mages would think to create something like it.

“It contains scale insects, parasites that live in deer innards, and a bit of rust, and the rendering process uses a great deal of steam. By using components that arrows 'dislike,' it can create a barrier from them.”

There was a reason Goldilocks had given the advice he had.

In truth, it was Kaya's fault. From the fragrance—well, magia called them mana waves—of Goldilocks's moisturizer that he had applied to stop the bonfire from drying out his skin, Kaya had surmised that Goldilocks had a gift for magic.

And so, what had begun as mere small talk to get her through the long night

had left her brimming with ideas for how to help Siegfried. Erich had spoken at length of a polemurgical codex he'd "paid dearly" to read (he hadn't gone into details, but from the way he nervously played with his shirt it had been clear that some deep trauma lay there), full of spells at the bleeding edge of magical innovation.

Goldilocks gave a mysterious smile as he raised a finger to his lips after parting with this valuable intel. *You know what'll happen if you tell, right?* it seemed to say. Kaya didn't mind. She was happy to push her proficiency in potions, something that she had always cursed herself for, to its limits.

Although Kaya couldn't execute such complex spells directly in the heat of the moment, with potions, she had all the time in the world to get the execution right. It cost down payments of time, catalysts, and a brief "metabolic gap" between use and activation, but with sufficient preparation, they performed admirably.

And so she concocted. And concocted and concocted and concocted.

"Are these the real deal?"

"Gattie, I sense potent magic from them. You can trust her," one of Gattie's magic-savvy concubines said, appraising the young herbalist's flask closely.

"How long do they work?"

"Thirty minutes."

"Radius?"

"Everyone who has had it sprayed on them."

Gattie let out a whistle; it sounded wholly unlike a mensch's. It was clear what the signal meant—only one thing was left to be done.

"Move into action! We have little time! Take up your arms!"

He would bring the battle to the enemy and decide things there. Gattie wiped the entrails from his battle-axe as Erich came up to the fired-up nemea.

"I doubt the knight in charge will be very happy."

"He can do what he likes! We'll need people to care for the wounded and

load up the deceased. If his troops can't fight, they can make themselves useful somehow!"

The knight might have been a cowardly mess, but Goldilocks was amazed at the nemea's gall. Goldilocks rushed to the center of the procession to deliver the news to the person in charge—at least on paper.

"Now everyone, let us set off! Today we will serve justice! Blood shall be repaid in blood!"

"Raaah!"

At Gattie's speech the entire caravan let out a hearty cheer. Those who were ready to fight took the weapons from their fallen comrades and slain enemies and stood at Gattie's rear.

Of course, Siegfried was among them. He wanted to be part of this tale. He didn't care that he wouldn't be named—in this one at least. All that he wanted was for his courage to stay with him to the end, to see an honorable battle through without running home.

[Tips] Arrow-deflecting magic is more popular than combat magic and is somewhat akin to a prebattle ritual. It confers a tactical advantage on ground troops by neutralizing their vulnerability to a ranged assault.

Most forms of this magic rely on manipulating air currents to create a protective barrier, but the formulae crafted by the Imperial College's magia are a cut or two above that.

It might have paled a little in comparison to scenes of thousands of arrows raining down that I'd seen on the silver screen, but even a volley numbering in the dozens was a sight to behold midflight. As was seeing them waver like candles in the breeze as they all sped off in a completely different direction at once.

"Whoa!"

"Awesome!"

“We can do this! Yeah, we can DO THIS!”

Our makeshift army consisted of brave adventurers and caravan workers who had taken up any available arms and equipment, our numbers reaching just over seventy.

As we made our way through the narrow passage, we spotted no infantry. We were a ragtag group, so our reactions at this turn of good fortune was to be expected.

“Wow, she’s quite something. A College student might have written up the recipe, yeah, but I doubt there are many who could use it to create something *this* effective.”

Atop Castor, I couldn’t help muttering to myself. Kaya was talented, that was for sure. She might have struggled with using combat or healing spells with a tool like her staff, especially in the heat of the moment, but if the circumstances were right she was a force that even a wall of demons would part for.

Sure, that arrow-warding potion took a pretty serious investment of time and resources, and the conceptual barrier wouldn’t defend against anything *other* than arrows, but I doubted that many could create something this potent. It was like receiving power in exchange for an oath—for a very specific target, she could punch way above her weight class. Siegfried was a truly lucky guy to have someone like Kaya by his side. That gal’s alchemical talents were on par with my own partner’s unparalleled scouting—real gifts from the gods, those two.

Thanks to Kaya, we bought ourselves a precious five minutes.

Jonas’s forces had been lying in wait, confident they would win, when all of a sudden our group emerged unscathed from their arrow rain and ready to cause some havoc. Their morale, pumped up solely by their fear of their leader, deflated the moment they were faced with an equivalent threat.

Infantry in this situation were sitting ducks. Now that their precious ranged support had been countered, they could do nothing but prepare for the worst. All that was left was for both sides to clash in all-out war. That or...

“Jonas Baltlinden! Come out from your hole, *worm!*”

By announcing a one-on-one battle with their leader, we could instantly crush

their morale in one fell swoop.

By Rhinian standards of martial law, challenging an enemy general to single combat was a laughably primitive approach. But we weren't an army—we were *adventurers*. Among our ilk, Genpei War-era ethics still abounded.

Whether you're a legitimate adventurer or a shameless bandit, your way of life hinges on the power of your name. A simple loss or victory can do anything for your reputation. And if you were someone who ruled your forces with fear, if you were mocked with a line you wouldn't repeat to your own mother—you know the stuff, about the size of the thing between your legs, mocking your ancestors, blah blah blah—then you couldn't let the person in question get away with it, could you?

Of course, it was possible to be the bigger man and dole out punishment later, but that wouldn't do. We were talking about a man who had killed his former master—the man who'd *knighted* him—and then butchered his entire family afterward, all because of a little spat. Jonas was a human bomb, waiting for the faintest spark to set him off. There was no way he would bear Gattie's remarks in silence.

“Who the fuck do you think you are, you jumped-up tomcat?! An overfed gutter cleaner like you, playing warrior? Go back to chasing rats!”

Ahh, you fell right for it. Hook, line, and sinker.

But something was wrong.

“Erich...”

“Yeah, I know, Margit.”

It was said that there were no mortals in the world less consistent than mensch; no one else ran a greater range between fame and infamy. I could tell even from afar that Jonas, charging hell-for-leather atop his unbroken, chestnut horse—twice Castor's size—possessed an unreal strength.

He measured over two meters tall, and his impressive frame was covered in bespoke plate armor that left him utterly impregnable. It stood without embellishment, save that it had been painted a deep, rich black, the subdued tones bringing to mind all the blood spilled under the might of his war hammer.

He had left his visor open; his face bore a monstrous expression. He had high cheekbones, sallow cheeks, small, deep-set eyes, and an untamed beard; he was the picture of traditional villainy. Back in Konigstuhl, it was one of Sir Lambert's perennial sources of grief that his face made children cry; here, I thought, was a man whose one good deed in this world was making my old mentor look positively cuddly by comparison.

Not only that, he had the physical strength to back it up. That's no exaggeration.

Despite his massive stature and burdensome armor, he carried himself with an almost impossible lightness; even in his state, he could mount his charger unaided. Then there was his gigantic war hammer. It was of a laughable size, yet he had it slung on his shoulder without showing a trace of effort.

Gods above, why did you have to give such a twisted SOB this much power?! Hey! I'm talking to you, God of Trials! Are you asleep?!

Jonas hadn't gotten to where he was simply for an evil disposition, a lack of hesitation toward violence, and his fearsome bearing. No, he was a martial master, confident that his inherent strength gave him the means to make an enemy of every living thing.

Just as I had tried to cover all my bases by maxing out my DEX, this meathead had decided that he would conquer everything with pure STR. If we were to use my own abilities as a comparison, he had taken Utter Power, the opposite of my Enchanting Artistry, and brute forced his way through life by making all physical checks require STR.

Even if he was a retired pro, there was no rational explanation for his sheer physical power that would make me go, "Yeah, that makes sense," short of some kind of divine favor.

Anyway, I know these were all my own silly suppositions, but I doubt I was far off the mark. The specific loadout of skills might not have been as I expected, but whatever build he was using, it was *busted*. He might not have had the ability to pick and choose his assets like I did, but like me, he wasn't drowning in power; rather, he'd carefully leveraged each of his talents to their fullest potential in service to each other so that he could do as he willed. He didn't

have Mister Fidelio's complete lack of an upper limit on his potential strength, and I wasn't about to say he even outclassed *me* just yet, but he was clearly the kind of guy whose wrong side you wanted to stay well clear of. More's the pity he didn't have a *right* side.

Of course, there was no way that this went unnoticed by a seasoned fighter like Gattie. I peered from my position and could see beads of sweat on his jaw from where he stood in front of us all. Fortunately his mane hid it from most everyone else, but I could tell that he was panicked by Jonas's power. I could tell that he had weighed his and Jonas's strength and found that his was lesser. All the same, he knew he couldn't back down.

Right now, Gattie was the backbone of this whole caravan's morale. Losing his nerve now would be akin to cutting our will to live at the root. And when that monster came charging in with his massive horse and giant hammer, it would turn into all-out chaos, and his foot soldiers would pick off the stragglers.

Which meant that I needed to formulate a plan.

I needed to make sure I didn't break my promise with the madam—I really needed to train myself out of calling her that in my own train of thought—and minimize our side's potential losses.

All right, got a plan.

I suppressed my presence, dismounted, and made my way to Siegfried, whose heart was dancing at the prospect of seeing a hero take on a villain.

[Tips] Single combat between leaders is the quickest route to turning the tables in a struggle between fighting forces. However, if such a gambit should fail, then utter defeat is practically guaranteed.

It is often practiced in battles between noble houses in order to lessen both sides' losses, but it has fallen out of favor in wars with foreign nations due to its high-risk nature.

An ear-piercing screech signaled the beginning of the battle.

Gattie had flung his axe in a preemptive attack, but it had been slammed out

of the sky by Jonas's war hammer and let out a piercing cry. Enchanted as it was, its force paled in comparison to the head of that maul, wide enough to swallow a grown mensch in its shadow.

And so, the blade of Gattie's battle-axe yielded.

"Grah!"

"Foolish boy! Out of options, adventurer?"

The axe felt different in Gattie's hand as it returned. Beads of sweat erupted all over his body. His beloved weapon, blessed by the maledictors of his homeland, was an object of vast power. Yet now it was twisted and broken. Gattie had been using this weapon for years now; just feeling its weight in his hand told him all he needed to know.

Just as this villain was not your average bandit, so too was his weapon not your average implement of murder. Its name, unknown to all but Jonas's subordinates, was *Beleidigung*.

Once upon a time, Baron Jotzheim had spent a fortune to bring his family mausoleum with him after he was stationed; within it stood an epitaph venerating the ancestors of the Jotzheim family, cast from unaging steel. After he'd slain the baron, Jonas had sneaked into the mausoleum, tore down the epitaph, and recast it into his monstrous bludgeon.

The epitaph bore no small magical potential of its own, and so this weapon, steeped in callous betrayal, became a cruel and deadly tool. As its name implied, it was imbued with the anger of the Jotzheim family—not just the ones Jonas murdered, but also every ancestor leading right back up to the Empire's founding whom Jonas's disgusting act disgraced.

Beleidigung was their shame incarnate.

The weapon's anger toward its wielder manifested as a terrible weight; even in an ogre's hands, it would threaten to kill its master in the attempt to lift it. Ironically, this had become a great boon to the inhuman knight.

There was no way that a simple magic axe could hold up against the anger and hatred of forty-eight generations and five centuries housed within Jonas's hammer.

Repelling this sudden attack, Jonas charged forward, propelled by pure rage. His fury was infectious, and quickly metabolized into fear—his horse, barely able to hold Jonas’s weight, intuited its master’s intention and dashed ahead like a rocket. Jonas brandished the hammer—a load a team of packhorses would balk at—and swept it in an arc from left to right, gracefully avoiding his mount.

Jonas was toying with Gattie. The nemea had no idea which direction to dodge. The hammer swung at such a tempo that it was impossible to gauge where the next blow would end, and the giant horse’s approach was terrifying in itself.

Gattie couldn’t stand down. He’d broken mankwa at full charge; how could he retreat from an oversized mensch? However, he knew that if the warhorse sustained its pace, he’d be trampled into a pulp.

“Ancestors, give me strength!”

Though his prayers here in the Empire would never reach the spirits of his pride and the nemea god of the southern continent, the great Progenitor Lion, Gattie still chose to hold his ground.

From Jonas’s grip, his dominant hand was probably his right. Gattie reasoned, then, that a juke to the left would make him a more difficult target and spare him a trampling.

All that remained was to strike at the horse’s legs with power enough to bend his axe even further.

Forgive me, my beloved! I cannot pull back, no matter the cost!

However, his resolve was batted away with an almost disappointing ease.

“What?!”

“Gah ha ha!”

Jonas switched to his left hand with a terrifying ease to make certain he caught Gattie in a brutal sweep. He wasn’t doing anything particularly difficult; after all, he was innately ambidextrous—it didn’t matter to him which hand he led with.

Gattie changed his stance—his axe moved to receive Jonas’s charge. Again that horrible shriek rang out, more pained than before. The head of the nemea’s battle-axe split in twain. The first strike had already done sizable damage, but Jonas’s charge had enough momentum to shatter it completely.

The duel was as good as decided. A victorious cry erupted from Jonas’s side and wails of despair came from the adventurers.

“Take that! Now, let’s see how much you’ve got left in you!”

“Grr... GROAAAR!”

Jonas wheeled his horse about on a dime before charging at Gattie once more.

Axe and hammer clashed for a third time. Gattie’s axe mustered the last of its efforts in its master’s service, but this time the blade was cleaved cleanly from the handle. Gattie’s war cry in the face of death didn’t faze the Infernal Knight in the slightest, who had left behind any trace of fear in the womb; it did nothing to slow the incoming charge.

Gattie had no way of blocking this attack. Even if he tried to dodge, it was good as over.

“Ngh... Fine then, DO YOUR WORST!”

“End of the road, you stuck-up furball!”

Gattie tossed aside the stripped and bent shaft and put everything on the line for what looked to be the final clash as Jonas approached, dragging his hammer along the ground. It was a gamble...no, it was a last stand, a suicidal taunt.

...And yet, the blow never came.

The hammer had instead struck down a spear that had soared through the air with an incredible velocity.

“Who goes there?!”

“Apologies for interrupting the duel!”

A single figure had emerged from the caravan’s force—who were on the verge of despair, clinging to the last dregs of their fighting spirit—putting the

force of his horse's full gallop behind his throw.

"Foolish brat! How dare you interrupt! Very well—name yourself!"

Gattie, on the verge of a certain death, was dazed. Jonas, on the other hand, was consumed with rage—a fury that pushed his strength to its highest boundary—at having his killing blow cut short.

An answer came ringing over the battlefield as the boy drew his sword.

"My name is Erich, fourth son to Johannes of Konigstuhl! I accept the full weight of my deed—now, to arms!"

"Hah, very well! Have at you! I'll rive your head from your shoulders and deliver the rotten thing to your family's doorstep!"

It was a brazen disruption, yet no one raised a complaint.

The Infernal Knight's underlings merely laughed, thinking that the child was just one more corpse waiting to be added to the pile, while the bodyguards were plunged into a deeper fear at the sight of a newbie throwing himself into the jaws of hell.

The two horses drew overlapping circles in the dirt. None had presumed this would turn into a clash on horseback.

Then to everyone's surprise, the one named Erich removed his helmet to let down his namesake—he had realized a helmet would do nothing if one of Jonas's attacks actually landed—and readied his sword in a charge, a mere sliver of steel compared to Gattie's axe.

There came a fourth clash of metal on metal, wholly unlike the three that came before. It was a clean sound, like two tankards of ale clashing together.

"Wh-What's this?!"

"Yes!"

The square war hammer should have pulverized the little adventurer and his puny sword along with him, but now a chunk of it had cleanly calved away, the striking side cut down to a triangle.



Erich had managed to slice right through—a single full-force strike that cut through steel and the weapon’s soul-crushing shame alike.

Unable to control the hammer midswing at its reduced weight, Jonas toppled from his horse.

Erich’s read on the situation had been right. His foe had looked down on his small build and chosen a vertical strike to crush him like a bug. And so the swordsman had made a wager on where and how to strike back.

Erich’s Insight had allowed him to judge the start of Jonas’s attack, his Lightning Reflexes had slowed time to an almost unbearable speed, and from there, his Scale IX DEX-powered Hybrid Sword Arts let him strike not at Jonas, but his hammer. To top it off, he had sent out Unseen Hands to form a protective wall between the shrapnel and his beloved horse.

Goldilocks had not entered the battle with the intent to go all out and take Jonas’s life; no, he had chosen self-preservation instead. Inertia was key to Erich’s strategy—his foe was astride a horse and thus couldn’t make minute dodges. The path to victory had hinged on the combined force of both their charges. Goldilocks had angled his blade with nigh impossible precision and found the sweet spot.

In that moment, the vengeance of generations of Jotzheims lifted.

The Infernal Knight had hit the ground with an incredible force, and although the impact hadn’t killed him, Erich raised his sword.

“Victory is mine!”

Erich galloped to his allies and raised his wondrous blade, carving an arc through the air to raise their spirits once more.

“It is too early to yield! The battle is just beginning! Think of your families back home—our victory today will shield them and others like them from these demons’ future misdeeds! From catastrophes that could befall your wives, your children! So stand, my comrades in arms! All who can fight—follow me and my sword!”

“Y...Yeah! Everyone, chaaarge!”

“RAAAH! Blood for blood!”

“Follow the gleam of his sword!”

Erich’s words had set the hearts of his cohort ablaze as they came upon the bandits like a rising tide.

“Ngh... I’m...still alive?”

Gattie finally came to his senses. He registered his concubines, who had stood aside for the duel, running to his side. The first thing he felt was shame.

For all that big talk, I got completely wrecked. And topped by that newbie too. Do I have one single thing to be proud of?

“My dear, you’re sa—”

“A weapon! Hand me a weapon! Anything will do!”

Gattie practically wrested the axe from one of his concubines’ outstretched hands, then dashed into the charge.

He was no longer the hero that roused his comrades—that position had fallen to Erich. His gleaming blade had turned them back into eager warriors. How else could he assuage his shame? Only a baptism in the blood of every mook he could reach would satisfy Gattie; he would open the way so that the hero of the day could land the killing blow. Otherwise, his pride as a warrior would never let him stand in battle again. He would take a dagger to his throat—a route that would protect his honor as a warrior but bar him from joining the pride of his ancestors.

Only a fool would envy his own savior.

If they won, if they could draw victory from this clash, then a tale would surely be written about this day. *After defeating the Infernal Knight, the valiant adventurers returned home scuffed, but not scarred, and resplendent in their hard-won honor.* There was no foe Gattie would not challenge, no wound he would not bear, if it meant the story could end on that line. Nemea men let out their war cry not to strike fear into the hearts of their enemies, but to draw attention away from the wives and children that they are sworn to protect.

If they won this, if they could turn this situation around, then Gattie wouldn’t

mind only amounting to a minor part in Erich's tale.

"You fuckin' brat! You're too big for your shittin' breeches!"

"Enough of that. Your existence itself is an eyesore."

Jonas stood up as he tossed aside his helmet, dented from the fall. Blood oozed from where his head had struck the ground.

He rose to uneasy footing. Before he could even draw the blood-soaked sword that had taken his master's life, Erich dashed forward from the vanguard and leaped from atop his horse before parting the king of traitors from his murderous hand with a plunging strike.

"GRAAAAAAAGH!"

"Huh, funny. Didn't expect the blood of such a despicable man to run red. Well, it'll turn black eventually, same as anyone's. You should know all too well. Why don't I speed it along?"

"You...BRAT! How dare you! My...my hand! What can a little brigade like yours do? I still have a whole legion of men!"

"You mean those bandits struggling over there?"

Goldilocks must have thought it too much effort to raise his hand, settling instead on jabbing his chin over at the chaos unfolding. The battle had only just begun, and Jonas's men were already being slaughtered.

"They don't look very motivated to me."

"Wh-What's happening?!"

"Their boss got put down by me, and I'm just a little guy. Who *wouldn't* panic? On top of that, look—your standard-bearer is running off into the distance."

The fluttering banner of Jonas Baltlinden's bloody reign was never supposed to move unless the man himself had ordered it. And yet there it was, disappearing out of sight, far from the battlefield.

[Tips] Destroying a weapon or disarming your foe is a well-loved frontline tactic. Once separated from their weapon, a warrior's pride in their skill is

rendered meaningless.

“Listen, Sieg. Do you want to be the star of a heroic saga, not just a no-name bit part?”

Goldilocks, that bastard of bastards, was offering the most intoxicating poison Siegfried had witnessed yet.

The proposition made Siegfried consider giving up on the incredible chance to watch a hero take on a top-rate villain. No, Siegfried couldn't lie to himself. Shaking Gattie's hand had been oil to the fire. Siegfried had taken part thinking that he was content with a minor role in the tale to be woven from these events, but his adventurer's heart pounded at Goldilocks's proposition.

Yet now, Siegfried found himself once again cursing his lips' ability to outpace his brain.

In the war sagas with a lick of artistic license, a supporting hero's best shot at the spotlight was supporting the lead with a surprise attack on the enemy's rear. Sometimes the hero was saved in the nick of time, sometimes the supporting actor lent their aid during the final clash—they were scenes that the fans enjoyed for their own muted glory. But Siegfried only listened to these parts with subdued interest; he understood why a powerful main character would want to achieve fame, but what could a lowly side character hope to achieve?

He wanted to smack himself with his spear like he had done to the bandit earlier.

The view from the far side of the enemy camp was like a window into hell itself. Siegfried had seen Margit's inhuman ability to mask her presence countless times, but even as she led him in relative safety, he regretted ever saying yes. The task at hand wasn't a simple matter of raising his voice to divert everyone's attention, *no*; this was an underhanded ploy meant to turn the momentary upset of Jonas's defeat into a guaranteed victory for the caravan crew. *Come on man*, he thought, *don't make it sound so easy!*

Not only that, Goldilocks had said Margit would know the signal, but the scene unfolding before his eyes was *not* what had been discussed beforehand!

“You towheaded viper! You said—”

“I know! Keep it down and keep going!”

They had passed unnoticed by Jonas’s minions and had just slipped through a blind spot under a detachment camped out on the hill—who were completely distracted by their boss’s single combat—when they saw the battle play out.

Siegfried had zero knowledge of what possibly could have happened to make Heavy Tusk Gattie lose, but were his eyes deceiving him, or was that Goldilocks Erich invading the sacred space of single combat?

With his head befuddled by the chaotic direction the battle had taken, he was forced to concentrate on the matter at hand as Margit goaded Polydeukes into a full gallop.

Right now Siegfried was totally unarmed. He hadn’t brought the spear he’d taken from his foe, and he’d left his sword, as he knew he wouldn’t be able to use it well on horseback. More importantly, the suicidal idiot presently fighting *the* Jonas Baltlinden had told him that he wouldn’t need a close-range weapon.

Margit scuttled ahead (she couldn’t ride, as her legs couldn’t get a good hold on the horse) as Siegfried drove Polydeukes after her.

Their target? To steal the Infernal Knight’s war banner.

An army’s flag acted as the physical and symbolic heart of their forces. The role of standard-bearer was entrusted only to an elite among elites, as stealing this precious figurehead amounts to nothing less than the collapse of a force’s morale. Siegfried was unaware of the skilled defense that awaited him; he was just happy to contribute.

“Graaaaagh!”

“Who is that fool?!”

Despite his fear, his bow hand was steady—he had fired a shot right at the feet of the flag bearer and his entourage. And in the next moment, the smoke bottle attached to the arrowhead shattered. The contents reacted as soon as they touched the open air, exploding into a cloud of white smoke.

“What...*koff*...is this?!”

“I... Gragh!”

“M-My eyes! My nose!”

Siegfried’s targets clawed at their faces in agony. They couldn’t suppress their coughing, their sneezing, and the tears running down their faces. The pain was enough to make a normal person collapse. This was one of Kaya’s newly developed “merciful potions,” a riff on the same tear gas the Baldur Clan had once turned on Erich (to considerably less effect).

Erich had relayed the tale to Kaya, explaining that in the end, it was a “merciful” potion in that it didn’t actually kill anyone or cause permanent damage. Naturally, his roundabout but pointed way of retelling the story had caused Kaya to cook up her own original variant.

If you didn’t apply a salve with the requisite catalysts (lemon juice was a reliable option) to your face, the smoke would cause incapacitating agony.

It would figure that he’d teach Kaya how to make shit this evil, Siegfried thought, but there was no reason to stop the horse’s advance. In the past Siegfried had once pulled Polydeukes to a jarring halt, but this had ended in a painful meeting with the ground; he knew that only one path lay ahead for him.

In any case, he’d come this far—he was going to see this through.

Siegfried didn’t stop, even when he heard a strange noise ring through the air from the battlefield. All the tales had told him that a hero never lost his nerve when it really mattered. All his fear turned to ashes in the heat of his desire for a grand and illustrious name.

“RAAAAH!”

The flag could still be seen amid the smoke. The flag bearer had probably been threatened with death on the spot if he ever gave up his position, and so he held fast despite the tears and snot streaming down his pain-stricken face.

His valor was to go unrewarded and unnoticed. He was a lackey of the Infernal Knight. All that awaited him was death in anonymity—all that Siegfried dreaded. What would persist of the man was only the simple fact that a young adventurer had stolen his charge and brought the battle to a decisive close.

“Good job, now keep going! We need to reach that hill. The archers have noticed us!”

“Gyaaaah! Heeelp! K-Kaya’s potion *works*, right?!”

At the dull thudding of arrows into earth behind him, the young adventurer’s bravery reached its last dregs. Kaya’s arrow ward was designed for long-distance fire, but up close, its efficacy came into question. If Siegfried hadn’t been through hell once already, he was certain that he would have soiled both his trousers and the saddle. All he could do was ride like hell itself was at his back and follow the scout so that he didn’t cross paths with any fleeing bandits.

By the time the adventure’s second MVP had found his allies again, the battle was over. To be fair, it was hardly a battle; *butchery*, once again, fit the bill better.

It was no surprise, really. With Baltlinden and his banner gone, the bandits’ resolve had shattered. There was no hero or valiant soul brave enough to fight with their souls so completely broken—any warrior with such mettle had chosen death over joining Jonas’s infernal army.

And so the army of the great evil known as the Reprobate had been slain by Gattie—his shame erased by his wounds—his gallant concubines, and a young hero whose name had not yet appeared in the tales.

“Erich, you *dick*! This was *not* what you said would happen!”

“Hey, Sieg, chill! It’s pretty much what I said. We won. You completed your own mission. Everyone’s happy!”

Erich had no intention of lying at this late stage. He wouldn’t have minded if Gattie had beaten Jonas. He’d have apologized in his internal monologue for underestimating his ally and joined the battle as one of many, happy to applaud the hero and Siegfried’s hard work in the background.

You see, even if the big boss had been defeated in single combat, his underlings would have stormed into battle, driven by the desire to avoid the hanging that would await if they were captured. Goldilocks knew that they would need that extra push to see them through the second phase of the battle.

Goldilocks had simply remained on the battlefield while his trustworthy allies commenced their mission. That he'd been served up the opportunity to claim the glory for himself had no doubt been a little present from the God of Trials, who wanted to see the boy squirm.

Erich didn't crave the spotlight to the exclusion of everyone else. After all, he had happily taken on the supporting role, or even the role that supported the supporting role, in many of his old campaigns.

"I thought I was gonna die! I almost shit my pants! I could've been stabbed! That flag was stupid heavy! I had *cavalry* chasing me!"

"Well, I dealt with them for you," chimed Margit.

"And I can't believe you made Kaya cook up anything that dangerous!"

Siegfried had stuck the flag in the ground nearby and taken hold of Erich's lapels as he roared at him. His vision was spinning; the terror and confusion of the fray had entirely quashed his feeling of a job well done. It was all too much for a normal mensch brain to process.

"D-Dee, he didn't make me! I asked him what I could do to help you when you went out to fight..."

It seemed as if Siegfried couldn't hear the placating voice of his friend, who was tending to the injured a ways off; Erich could only smile at his raging ally.

Deep down, Erich had longed for the company of someone like Siegfried, who exuded this wonderful main-character energy.

The young adventurer's hands were pried away from Erich's armor—but not to stop Siegfried's one-sided assault. Gattie dropped to one knee between the two young heroes and lifted them high upon each shoulder.

"All right!"

"Wh-What's going on?!"

"Lend me your ears, friends! The day is ours! We have given the bandits their just deserts for the innocents they've slaughtered! We have captured the Infernal Knight alive and broken his army! I might have lost, but you! All of you...have *won!*"

The attack squad, who had just returned from cleaning up the stragglers, and the bodyguards, who had remained behind until the fighting was over, all fixed their gazes on Gattie and the two young men upon his shoulders.

“Praise their names! When you return home, tell everyone what you witnessed here today! Of the battle you *all* brought an end to! Carve these names into your hearts! Goldilocks Erich, who saved my life! And Siegfried, who parted the enemy from their banner and saved us all! Do not forget them!”

And so, the nemean hero, beaten but alive, roared their names over again on the hill-lined road.

This was the first page of their heroic sagas—the tales that would tell the world of the valor of Goldilocks Erich and Siegfried the Lucky and Hapless.

[Tips] A story is only a story if someone lives to tell it.

Winter of the Sixteenth Year

No Hard Feelings, But...

Dice tell no lies, and it is the GM's responsibility to dispense nothing but the truth to their players.

However, just because you can't *lie* doesn't mean you can't *omit*. It's not the GM's fault if their PCs don't pry too deeply into what the narration only touches on. After all, the GM needs to listen to the devil on their shoulder and lead their PCs as close to the jaws of death as possible for the sake of an enjoyable campaign.

When the dust has settled, one of the most rewarding parts of the session is coming up with a hard-won prize for their players.

Parts of the mountain of advice that our senior adventurer, the incredible Mister Fidelio, gave us came back to me at that moment.

"Hey, Erich! Are you even listening? You feelin' beat or something?"

"Hm? Ah, sorry, Siegfried. Yeah, more tired than I thought. What were you saying?"

With the gates of hell behind us, my comrade in arms Siegfried and I (now more than ever, folks were convinced we were a no-foolin' adventuring party) had settled in at the Buck's Antlers. This was Siegfried's chosen haunt; we found ourselves in a corner of the tavern, keeping our conversation quiet.

"Come on, man. We were talking about how to split the bounty. Jeez, are you seriously okay?"

"Yeah, totally fine. Just a bit worn down to the nubs, that's all."

Fall was over, and as the laws of the world demanded, winter was here. After our triumph over Jonas Baltlinden and his bandit army, we'd been raised up as the heroes of the hour.

His head alone was worth a whopping fifty drachmae, and we had managed to cart him back into Marsheim still breathing. Word had started to spread as soon as we reached the outskirts of the city, and so by the time we got back, quite the celebration was awaiting us.

Technically speaking, I supposed the one who received the “warmest” welcome was the man himself, Jonas.

Good grief was it *difficult* to bring a man so intent on killing himself back safely. We’d bound him as tightly as we could, gagged him, and quite literally forced him to drink water. To top it off, in order to strip him of any way to fight back or even escape, the tendons in his legs had been sliced to ribbons.

Someone had been keeping an eye out for us; a shout had rung out, and the adventurers stationed at the west gate parted to welcome us into the city proper. The guards were less focused on checking our papers as we entered, instead pouring their efforts into dragging out an open carriage. They ordered us to set Jonas in it and take him to the Adventurer’s Association.

We hadn’t come straight back to Marsheim. We had finished off our bodyguard duties, and that had left ample time for word to make its way back here. I wasn’t totally surprised to see that the local administration and the Association had thought up a little welcome present for our quarry. They wanted to let the whole region know that adventurers of Marsheim had purged its blight. It was to be a public display that this treasonous human stain had finally been given his just deserts. Still, I’d been surprised that the local administration had already committed so much to our reception with only rumors of our deeds to go on.

Yes, strapped to his open carriage, Jonas’s parade had begun. With us pulling him along, every pair of eyes that fell on him fell on us too. However, Jonas received a special present that we didn’t—rocks and filth slung his way.

Such was Jonas’s infamy. His reign of terror had caused vast and indiscriminate suffering, and the crowds were out in full force to vent their fury—those who had come to the region to seek their fortune, adventurers like Siegfried who had come to make a name for themselves, and those who had no choice but to move to Marsheim after their hometowns had been torched by

the Infernal Knight.

It was quite the sight. If the margrave's knights hadn't come down from his manor to line the streets, I think the crowds would have stormed the carriage and killed Jonas with their bare hands before he even got the chance to have his public execution.

After we handed him over, Jonas's official hearing convened for a few hours; by the time we were let out, afternoon had given way to night.

We were told that discussions regarding our reward would come later and so the only things that awaited were rest and the satisfaction of a job well done... No, of course not! We threw an absolute *blowout* of a party on par with Coronation Day in Berylin. The margrave had realized he needed to appease his people; what better lubricant for the societal machinery was there than free booze? Folks were practically *swimming* in the stuff.

Naturally some of the local bigwigs had eyed up this opportunity to get in the people's good books, and so the nobles and all the big names had joined in on the bacchanal, potluck-style. Even some hardworking merchants thought, *Ahh, screw it*, and had contributed for a citywide celebration.

We weren't new faces in town by any stretch, so we received many personal congratulations from those who knew us. As soon as we came out from questioning, some fellow adventurers had pulled us into the party with claps on the back; obviously we had no choice but to take part.

The Association building was chiefly used for meetings between nobles and adventurers; I don't know whose idea it was, but it had been opened up as its own party space, which meant that there was no way for us to escape. We'd been roped into the revels with all the vigor of a mugging. Our clothes eventually grew soaked as people forced drinks into our hands and merrily clashed their tankards into our own.

Margit had anticipated that the whole affair was going to pop off like this and clambered up into the rafters to hide herself; it would be a good while before she came to save me.

I felt bad for not finding a way to spare Siegfried and Kaya from the chaos of the spotlight. *Sorry guys, I'd thought, I'm barely hanging on myself.* But I

couldn't get *too* broken up about it, because Siegfried had chosen to lean all the way in, getting progressively more plastered as he merrily recounted everything that had gone down. He hadn't chewed me out over it, so I was sure he didn't mind. It was as I'd crawled back to the Snoozing Kitten that I'd found that my own tribulations were only just beginning.

Pushing both Shymar and Mister Fidelio aside, Fidelio's old "Catchpenny Scribbler" friend sank his claws into me. My hearing before the Association seemed *cute* compared to his barrage of prying questions.

"What happened?" "What went through your head?" "What did you do?" I found myself sitting with the poet until dawn under his onslaught; more than anything, I just wanted to scream *I'm not going to remember every last detail, dammit!* Still, I had to give credit where it was due: this same passion and persistence of his had earned him personal requests from the Emperor himself to perform at court fetes. For the moment, my desperate need for a little time alone hardly outweighed his career's bottomless hunger for material.

If that wasn't enough I had to deal with his incessant revisionist mumbling. "Shame, it would've been a bit more exciting if Gattie'd died here. Yeah, let's change it. We can rewrite it so that you're clearing up the bandits," or "Cutting down the hammer in one fell swoop is cool, but we need to think about the music. Okay, how about you trade a few epic blows so I can fit it to a piece with some staying power," he'd mutter as he scribbled in his notes. It was the height of brazenness.

Come on, am I supposed to just bend over and take it if Gattie chews me out for letting you kill him off to smooth out the plot arc?

And sure, I'm not the tallest guy in the biz; I get that he thought the story needed a little mustard on it to really sell it to the people who knew my deal, but wouldn't it be a bit over the top for me to leap from my saddle to unhorse Jonas with a flying kick?

I mean, I could do it if he asked, but I didn't think I had the acrobatic finesse to pull it off in the heat of battle.

I finally got why Mister Fidelio had stuck him with such cruel nicknames. If my fellow victim of the Catchpenny Scribbler hadn't come in saying, "I think he

needs to rest,” I’d still be stuck in that chair as we speak. I could see where the bard was coming from, but you can only put up with so much workshop talk and idle harp-jamming.

In the end, I ended up okaying a lot of his decisions, and the end product was *markedly* divergent from the facts.

Apparently the celebrations had lasted two days, and if that weren’t enough, Jonas Baltlinden had been carted off to various different plazas for a day each for the next two weeks, but during all this time I kept safe and secluded in the Snoozing Kitten. All the same, I received many visitors—in addition to the faux poet and a cadre of muckrakers, Miss Laurentius and Hansel’s group came to see me—and I grew so bored of reciting the same chain of events over and over again with a mug of ale forced into my hand that by the end of it I was spent in both body and in mind.

Margit ditched me, saying that she would check the bulletin boards for jobs, so it was a pretty rough time. No, I shouldn’t be coy about it—it was *exhausting*. I could finally see why some famous adventurers chose to disappear from the public eye.

But I was looking forward to being able to commiserate with Siegfried. Unlike me, his digs were common knowledge; I was certain the poets had been brawling on his doorstep for a shot at penning his side of the tale.

“But seriously man, you really think we’re gonna make two hundred drachmae?”

“Ah, yeah, probably. He had quite the bounty on him, *and* we handed him in alive. I’d expect more, to be honest.”

We spoke in secret—well, everyone in Marsheim knew our faces so we had to just whisper as quietly as we could—so that no one heard us talk about our imminent incredible payday.

A little while ago, a messenger from the Association had asked me to come visit, and when I’d arrived, I’d been told that the government had approved our reward.

I wanted to throw my arms up in the air and shout, “Woo-hoo, quadruple

payout!” but working with Lady Agrippina had thrown any financial sense I might have had royally out of whack. *Only four times more for all the work of keeping him alive?* The government usually tacked on as much as an extra zero to the going rate for *normal* bandits on a live capture—you’ve got to keep the deterrent displays on the roads stocked somehow, after all—and it left me with a little twinge in my heart to see the state tighten its purse strings now.

Come on, two hundred drachmae wouldn’t cover a fraction of Lady Leizniz’s annual cosplay budget.

I supposed that the original going price for Jonas was a lot higher than your run-of-the-mill bandit’s, so expecting to receive ten times that might have been a bit greedy. All the same, it irked me.

Margit and Kaya had their own reasons for sitting our meeting out this time. Kaya had all but fainted at the sound of our new sum, and so my partner was elsewhere taking care of her.

I could tell that Margit wasn’t too satisfied. Less so with the material reward, but more so with what the price indicated about the scale of her prey. A hunter with her level of prestige could reasonably ask a hundred drachmae for a *kill*, never mind a live capture. Our target today was an Imperial turncoat with an actual army, but the fact that Jonas had earned us only two hundred drachmae indicated that he was merely a big fish in a tiny pond.

I should note that, whatever any of us thought of the bounty, we’d also received a letter from a branch family of Baron Jotzheim’s—pretty distant, in all honesty—thanking us for allowing for their successful appointment as the baron’s successors. I knew I had won vengeance for the Jotzheim family, but I wasn’t totally bothered to be honest. I mean, it was an appointment that came with the death of pretty much the entire Jotzheim family. There was no family wealth, and the property they had back in the Imperial capital was most likely just some tiny house. The only thing they would get out of this would probably be a path to serve a magistrate in some tiny canton somewhere.

Being honest, I’d kind of been hoping to receive direct thanks from the margrave. It would’ve boosted my name in an instant and quashed my petty squabbles with the riffraff clans in one fell swoop.

I should temper my expectations. Some deeds go unrewarded, huh.

It's not like I disliked these little covert operations, but I didn't sign up for the whole adventuring biz to get tangled in a bunch of interclan power struggles. If the setting was different I might have been interested, but come on, a world of sword and sorcery should only have so much room for this kind of petty politicking!

"Anyway, I was thinking maybe we could split it in thirds," I said.

"Huh? In three?" Siegfried replied.

"Yeah. One-third to you guys, one-third to us, and the final third to the families of the adventurers who died during the battle."

"Pull the other one, it's got bells on it," Siegfried muttered as his hand clasped tighter around his tankard of ale. The beer that I'd bought to merely secure a seat in the tavern bubbled quietly.

"Are you not happy with that?"

"Of course not," he said.

Arguing over how to split the loot was typical adventurer fare. We'd been overdue for some proper haggling. I wanted to distribute the money differently, not just for more heroic brownie points, but also to patch up any lingering feelings of jealousy between us. Apparently I was going to have to put us back on the same page.

"One-third is way too much for us!" Siegfried exclaimed.

"Oh, *that's* what you meant."

"Wait, what?"

Hold on, me. Now it looks like I'm underestimating him. Maybe I could give him all the cash instead? No, no, that won't solve things.

"I think we should give more to both the survivors *and* to the families of those who died. We made it back alive with fame and glory. That's a damn good enough reward if you ask me."

It was clear to me now that Siegfried wasn't just some kid being dragged

along by bigger dreams than he could handle. Sure, Siegfried yearned to be a hero. But, even if he didn't know it himself, he had a natural noble streak that pointed him in the right direction to truly follow through on that desire to walk in his heroes' footsteps.

I had this nagging feeling that's been growing since we met, I thought, but I'm certain now that you're no mere beginner adventurer.

If he'd been in my position, I suspect he'd have done just the same, turning down knighthood and full-time study at the College so he could follow the allure of adventure and live as a true first-level PC.

"Yeah, you're totally right. They have a right to a share too. It wasn't just us four that toppled the Infernal Knight and his army—we weren't the ones who cut down a hundred of his men. We have an obligation to share."

I was fully aware that our victory on that battlefield wasn't brought about by us four. It was a victory won by Gattie and every last person standing out there. *Hmm, what's that? The knight hired from the local strongarm who was there too? I'm sure he got a hearty pat on the back, so that's something we don't need to involve ourselves in, yup.*

Warriors who put their lives on the line deserved worthy payment for their valor. That wasn't all; I needed to actually make a show of my respect, or else some unsavory rumors might start to fly behind my back. Before people started muttering things like, "That brat just happened to be there and stole the glory all for himself, the bastard," I needed to illustrate that I wasn't just a greedy so-and-so: that I, as we all did, had a code to keep.

Unlike Siegfried, I wasn't saying any of this to be cool or heroic. I was just letting years of Machiavellian conditioning from my days in indenture to the witch-queen herself call the shots.

Just like fathers back home threw big parties to try and make everyone forget that his family would reap the better part of the reward for their efforts, we needed to make a show of our big hearts so that the families of the deceased felt vindicated and the attitude toward us didn't sour. Envy was a human constant, even in cases where our hard-earned money was a result of a battle that flirted with death itself.

It was a simple thing to manage once you disabused yourself of your more naive reflexes. Dealing with these little disagreements that even GMs were prone to skip over was a small price to pay so long as it smoothed out the path to the next adventure.

Meanwhile my sweet, pure, innocent hero in the making had arrived at a similar conclusion on the grounds of pure virtue ethics; his heroes had done it, so it must have been the right thing. Ah, his good heart was practically blinding.

Maybe I'd gotten jaded in my old age.

"Anyway, come on, man. I think it's unfair for me and Kaya to get the same amount as you and Margit. All I did was steal the flag; you're the one who took down Baltlinden."

"Hey, capturing the enemy banner is a real achievement. I know they're not your usual taste, but how about listening to some war epics sometime?"

"Ugh, I can never get into those—all the lists of super long noble names for the completionists' sake. Although the battle scenes are pretty cool."

"Just take notes, it'll help. Anyway, that final push is really crucial, Sieg. The reason our losses during the all-out clash were so low was because you snapped the enemy's morale in half."

"Yeah, but again, I didn't do it on my own. I borrowed your horse, Margit led the way, and we only distracted the flag bearer long enough to pull the whole thing off thanks to Kaya's potion. I'm really not that skilled."

"Aha, straight into my trap, comrade. You are quite right—Kaya's potions were crucial, whether in avoiding arrow fire or stealing the flag. It was a victory aided by both your efforts! I won't advise you on how the married couple should split their share, but her work is proof that as a team, you deserve your portion of the prize."

"Wh-Wh-Who said we were married?!"

My young friend slammed both palms on the table as he stood up, his face beet red.

Oh ho, still loitering on the first level of this love-dungeon, are you?

“You’re not? You seem like a good match to me. A real couple of lovebirds.”

“Oh shut your trap... Kaya deserves way better than me. Don’t talk about her like she’s some kind of bonus for me to collect. I ain’t been to school, but I’ve heard enough poems and stories to know where you’re steering.”

“My apologies—I take it back.”

These two had a more complex relationship than I gave them credit for. If they weren’t simple chums who had happily strolled out of their canton hand in hand like Margit and I had, then I assumed that they had some issues that were not your average fare.

Whatever the case, I wanted them to have their reward.

I ushered Siegfried back down and we sat face-to-face once again. Whispering would change the register of what I had to say. I needed to prove to Siegfried that he and Kaya didn’t just deserve their money—they *needed* it.

“Look around you, Siegfried. What do you see?”

“Nothing, really. We’re in a grimy tavern full of drunks and layabouts. Upstairs ain’t great either.”

It was still daytime, but the Buck’s Antlers was renowned for cheap booze and beds, so it was full of adventurers throwing back mugs of beer that I didn’t dare to touch.

Winter was a dry season for your average murderhobo.

“Yeah. That’s why you need to take the money and fix your own circumstances, get me?”

The only people running caravans in this much snow either really loved their jobs or were transporting goods that needed to be delivered now or else. The cold wasn’t enough to drive bandits off, so most merchants preferred to take the time off until the roads were clear and less dangerous again.

Farmers and merchants alike obeyed the changing of the seasons—they worked their asses off during spring to fall, and during the winter they would tackle all the little things that piled up. As a result, the need for adventurers dropped as well.

Of course odd jobs that were dressed-up chores were still available, but these were limited, and so many adventurers wasted away the hours, drowning their boredom in drink.

“You’re still sleeping in the group dorm, aren’t you, Siegfried?”

“Yeah, we haven’t been paid for the bounty yet, so...”

“And that’s exactly why you’re still breathing right now. Come on, think about it. What would be easier: taking down a terror worth fifty drachmae, or preying on someone who’s got it in their pockets? Which would sound like an easier and more appealing target to an exhausted fool whose heroic dreams have dried up?”

“Ah...!”

I had pulled the wool from his eyes. Siegfried’s face gradually grew more and more pale.

Adventurers were split into two major groups: foolish kids like us who were pulled in by the allure of glory and the terminally unemployable. It was the latter group who were wasting their time drinking in this dirt-cheap inn right now. Adventurers did any old job for money, but for the sad lot here, they would let the devil creep into their hearts for a chance at turning their lives around.

Siegfried was safe for now because he hadn’t received his big blowout yet, but going to bed with a stack of drachmae under your pillow was like wearing a great big neon sign reading “WORLD-CLASS SUCKER.” Sure, Kaya would have the relative security of her own room, but mere doors and locks would hardly be a sufficient deterrent for a bunch of claim jumpers.

“So take the money and find somewhere you can hunker down without worrying about this stuff. If you don’t, your stinginess is going to get you a knife in the throat one day or another.”

“D-Damn man, you’re completely right. How could I not see that? I’ve watched those clowns fight over scraps in the dorms a hundred times by now.”

Siegfried had realized that he was not exempt from such a stupid fate. *Yup, you’ve gone up in my books, young lad.* He had realized the fragility of life—that

even the most noble of heroes would die if their throat was slit while they slept. I admired his maturity.

Then again, maybe he'd made the connection so quickly because of all those sagas knocking around in his skull. Plenty of heroic tales closed on a down note with a surreptitious poisoning at dinner or a new bedmate pulling a shiv in the dark. He probably had a whole catalog of disturbing endings on tap.

"It's no surprise. You leave your valuables with Kaya in her room, so you probably just lost sense that you could be a target too."

And so I pushed my plan to its final stage and made him take sixty-six drachmae, a rough third of the bounty, for himself.

In a way it was fortunate we didn't actually have the money yet. The news I'd received today simply said that a figure had been calculated and that we would receive it on their decided date—it would take the authorities a little while to process everything, after all. This gave me an ample window to convince Siegfried of the meaning behind such a sum.

"When Kaya's gathered herself, I suggest you find a good place to move to right away. Let's see... The Snowy Silverwolf is probably your cheapest option. If you could spare a bit more, I'd suggest getting a private room at the Golden Mane. At any rate, you want some distance from this wretched hive of scum and villainy."

"S-Sure, I hear ya loud and clear. We've been paid for the bodyguard job, after all... The Golden Mane's a good shout for an adventurer worth his salt, isn't it? How much is it to stay for one night?"

"A one-person room with no meals is fifty assarii a day."

"Fifty?! Without food?!"

"You get real good quality for the price and the clientele are all trustworthy. The inn's well guarded too. One piece of silver for your guaranteed safety is a bargain, no?"

"Y-Yeah, but still... Maybe I should wait to move until we get paid... Fifty assarii, man, it's daylight robbery."

“They clean the rooms every other day. I think it’s a steal to be honest. It’s a respectable inn, so you won’t get the sort of riffraff who drink until they vomit or pass out that you get here. I wouldn’t be so quick to say no.”

The good thing about respectable inns was that their owners had the power to tell the Association manager to demote particularly unruly or belligerent customers. Their private rooms weren’t for sale to folks from the nastier clans who’d inevitably put the space to unwelcome (and costly) use.

All the same, I was impressed that, just as I’d imagined, he had been keeping his purse strings tight. I’d been prepared to lend him some cash, but Siegfried had been saving up for the sake of fixing his equipment.

He was an exemplary specimen of our sort of animal—people who would survive on cheap booze and food so that we had enough to spare for our more specialized needs. We would curl up in hay beside our horses to leave room in the budget for the kit we’d need on the next adventure.

Yes, he and I were alike. All the same, now that he had the means, the guy deserved to splurge a little. I wanted to grab his character sheet and scribble down some nice weapons, and maybe some magic items to boot—really give him the whole “Monty Haul” special. But in the meantime, he would have to stay alive so that he could get there on his own.

“I’d advise moving today if you can. If rumor gets out about when you’re being paid, the moment you come here to grab your things might be your last moment alive.”

“Okay, I get it. It’s not as if I’ve got a lot of stuff, so we can move soon. Tch... I feel gross. Like I’m receiving your charity.”

“Hey, hey, it’s a reward we all earned fairly. Just accept it already.”

“Grah, fine, fine! You better not beg for it back in a few days.”

“You couldn’t force me to. When I’m out on epic adventures every other day, today’s reward will seem like chump change!”

I was aware that any head for money I’d once possessed had been chewed up and spat out by Lady Agrippina and Lady Leizniz, but that isn’t to say I’d forgotten what it could do for you.

This was enough money to buy a house—a simple one, but *bought-and-paid-for real estate*, for cryin’ out loud—so I advised him that it might be worth seeing if any cheap but well-maintained places were up for sale.

“A h-house?! Seriously?”

“Yeah. You get the occasional real winner amid the dross. Come on, you haven’t forgotten what your partner does, do you?”

“Oh yeah, right... I...I’ve always wanted to get Kaya her own workshop. If we hadn’t left Illfurth, she was set to inherit one back home.”

Kaya was a mage and an herbalist. I’d truck on fine so long as I had my catalyst and a weapon, but she needed all sorts of tools and equipment. I was almost suspicious at how she had managed to concoct so much holed up in that squalid private room of hers.

“Ugh, you’re right... I need to pay her back, if only a little bit.”

“You said it. It’s a big task to do right away, so I’d recommend seeing if the Association can help. They might have some properties you can look at.”

“Gotcha. I’ll ask the gals at reception for help.”

Yeah, those three really were pretty damn good at helping us out. I was a bit curious about his use of “gals,” though. Maybe they’d chewed him out for treating them like they were older than they would like to think they were.

At any rate, we had neatly tied up all the chaos the world’s GM had sprung on us. Jonas Baltlinden’s public execution was to be held soon, but I honestly didn’t care to go. I’d already done enough to kill the man already. I wasn’t the sort of person so paranoid they’d wait at their front window to make sure the garbage truck takes away their trash in the morning.

One thing that I *was* holding out on was a little bonus. Jonas was an infamous name, and I’d heard that we might have a little special promotion waiting for us, but the fact that we hadn’t heard anything today meant that it was probably off the table.

I wondered if they were holding back because we’d reached ruby-red so quickly already?

Oh well, you can't rush these things.

"By the way, Siegfried."

"What now?"

"Two hundred doesn't divide by three, so we can't split it evenly."

"What? I'm no good with figures."

"Oh yeah? Well, here's a piece of advice from me: make time to learn. You must have noticed by now that a lot of the sagas would've ended a lot sooner if the heroes didn't have the sense to riddle that stuff out."

I wondered what kind of life Siegfried had trained him to always respond, "Oh yeah, you're right!" when I packaged advice in hero lore. Yes, he was proud at times, but he always stuck at things he wished to learn with the utmost gumption. It was a tough trick to pick up.

What can I say, you just can't help liking a guy who knows he's as dumb as a sack of hammers and still wants to learn.

"Anyway, you're the one who complained you were receiving too big a share, so I'll take the extra, okay?"

"Right... And how much is that?"

"Let me pay for the drinks today!"

"That's as good as nothing!"

As my comrade in arms shouted at me, I laughed back at him and gave a few silent words of thanks to the Powers That Be for the gift of an irreplaceable friend.

[Tips] In the countryside, where outlets for entertainment are few, it isn't just the common folk who find enjoyment in any form of lively commotion.

"You look a bit calmer now."

"I-I'm really sorry."

While Erich and Siegfried were downstairs talking, Margit was tending to Kaya

in her small room upstairs in the Buck's Antlers, aware that Kaya would prefer another girl's support. Margit loosened the snug bits of Kaya's outfit, took off her boots, and laid a damp cloth on her forehead to bring her temperature down.

"Is it really such a big concern?"

"O-Of course, it's two hundred whole drachmae! It's an incredible amount even after you split it. Even one drachma would be a heavy weight in my purse."

"It's more than enough to kill for, that's for sure."

As Margit let out a cheeky snicker, Kaya wanted to point out that this wasn't a laughing matter.

Kaya had been overcome with worry about what had taken Siegfried a whole conversation with Erich to realize. People's lives were cheap; especially so if you were a poor soul who wasn't listed in a family register. The authorities wouldn't bother investigating a dead body lying in a pool of mud in a back alley; what was going to make it worth their time and effort? Only the smell of hard cash or clout could move them to meaningful action.

Why *wouldn't* Kaya have nearly fainted with worry? Every fledgling adventurer dreamed of the day they would be a household name with a panoply of awesome gear to boot, but these dreams were often cut short by creeping avarice—whether it was your own or someone else's hardly mattered.

Money management was a crucial but arduous job in itself—who should hold it, where to put it, how to store it safely.

Paper money got heavy when enough of it stacked up, but that was nothing compared to carrying a bag full of bronze coins. If word got out about what treasures lay within, unsavory clans could come knocking, hungry for your hard-earned windfall. Even a single grubby assarius was cause enough for its unprepared holder to take a dagger in the back; the world was hardly short of folk who'd trade a fellow's lifeblood for a round of cheap swill. Such monsters far outnumbered any other kind.

However, there were many who went about their lives blissfully unaware of

this reality. Even though Kaya hated the fact that her best friend slept alone in that group dorm, she sated herself with at least having his belongings here in this room with her. She did what she could to keep the creeping hands of evil away from Siegfried, whether that be giving him a ward to hold while he slept or sneaking antitoxin into his stimulant potions.

If Siegfried didn't mind, Kaya would have been happy to sleep huddled together in this tiny room, like birds seeking shelter from the rain.

Margit chuckled.

"What is it?" Kaya asked.

"Nothing. I was just thinking that you, too, are very fond of your childhood friend."

Kaya had thought that Margit's chuckling was at her own timidity, so this response came like a left hook out of the blue. The comment sent her pulse quickening again after she had worked so hard to lower it.

"So then, how did you two meet?"

"I, uh, well, it's nothing special really."

"Oh no, I highly doubt there are any tales of romance in this world that *aren't* interesting!"

Margit went straight to the point, leaving Kaya no room to hide in euphemism. Still, Kaya struggled to square the potent feeling that Siegfried stirred up within her with a word as cute as "romance."

The closest word that she could find would be "resolve."

"Well, I suppose it's rude for the person asking not to share as well."

Seeing the mage fall into a troubled silence, the huntress decided that she would take a leaf out of her closest friend's book and open her heart first. Not only that, Margit was only just realizing that Kaya was the first woman her own age that she'd gotten to know in Marsheim. She found herself wanting to just talk to someone about the simple things in life as she'd done back home in Konigstuhl.

"If Erich hadn't been there, I imagine I would never have found a place of my

own.”

“What do you mean?”

“Back in our canton—well, this is a story from when we were kids, really—a lot of our peers loved playing outside. One of the most popular games was fox and geese and, well, you don’t need me to tell you what it’s like when someone like me is involved, do you?”

Margit gave an awkward smile and leaped up onto the wooden bars over the window they had opened earlier for air. Seeing her take to the air so effortlessly, Kaya recognized what Margit meant immediately. Arachne were skilled at passing undetected, and this was compounded by Margit’s small stature. If she was a goose, the game would never end no matter how much time the foxes spent hunting for her.

“I think I would’ve starved if it hadn’t been for him.”

“Starved?”

“I was never satisfied with my hunts. It was so dull. But he managed to catch me; he managed to get away from me. In the end, he actually came up with schemes for everyone to work together and continue playing the game. Can you believe it? The boy reinvented every hunter’s trick I’d ever learned from first principles, just for fox and geese!”

Margit proudly spoke of her partner’s feats.

Kaya was impressed in all honesty. To think that a mensch, the most imperceptive specimens of all humankind, managed to train himself to catch an arachne while he was still only a child.

Even with his martial training, *Siegfried* could never ferret out Margit if she didn’t want to be found, let alone Kaya. She had lost track of the number of times her best friend had leaped out of his skin and dropped whatever he was holding—so much tea, wasted—all because Margit had sprung up on him from behind to get his attention.

“We’re only from a small canton. I doubt there was anyone there who could have hoped to become stronger than Erich. That’s why I think that in another life, unless there’d been some kind of happy accident, I would never have felt so

fulfilled. I would have made do on what scraps of prosaic joy I could gather day-to-day, starved of real satisfaction.”

“You mean...*hunting*, right?”

“Hee hee, of course. I can see now why my mother was an adventurer once herself. And why she had dropped everything to capture my father when she realized that his skill was a match for hers.”

Margit’s mother’s retirement came as a shock to everyone, and her allies had berated her heavily for it. Margit laughed that when seasonal letters came from them, they were still full of disdain for her mother’s choices.

“Yes, I suppose their wedding must have been a real bolt from the blue.”

“If I said, ‘Okay guys, I’ve got enough money now, so I’m going back to Konigstuhl to marry Erich, bye!’ I think a lot of people would be shocked that I was giving all this up. I’d hardly be any different from her.”

Kaya knew Margit was joking, but a shiver ran down her back.

Siegfried had caught a few “lucky” breaks, and it had made him a figure of note in Marsheim. He had acquired a sum that set smaller clans drooling, and on top of that he had a mage with him that aided his grand efforts. Kaya imagined that if Siegfried hadn’t been a “party member” with Goldilocks—an adventurer who pushed aside all of the clans and treated them like dirt by the roadside—they would be up to their ears in slaving, gold-crazed recruiters by now. Without their allies, Kaya imagined that all her worst fears would turn to reality.

“But don’t you worry, I’m not quite sated just yet.”

Margit pulled at the loop of string around her neck to reveal a large fang. It was a simple necklace that seemed far removed from the usual flashy fare Kaya expected from an arachne.

This was Margit’s trophy from the second-most difficult hunt after Erich—the wolves who’d plagued her canton.

But it still hadn’t been enough. Even the great wolf the fang had come from, which she had cornered as it threatened the children of the canton, hadn’t

sated the huntress. The thrill of it came and went in the span of two days.

When they were playing around, it was easy to get one over on Erich. But what if it were a *real* hunt? What if she were to hunt Erich when his bloodlust was at its peak and he cut down everyone in his way? If she was being honest, Margit didn't feel like she would be so lucky as to walk away with her head still on her shoulders.

She was playing the long game. Erich was a quarry that would only grow stronger, larger, more deadly. What greater prize was there than prey hard and trusty as a whetstone, always close, always demanding you find a way to be that little bit faster, smarter, fiercer?

He was her beloved target, the one whose presence—barring some utter disaster—could always whet her appetite when it surged.

After all, even after everything they had been through, she still couldn't see how deep Erich's strength lay. Not even Margit knew how much this gold-furred wolf would grow after besting yet stronger enemies and yet more difficult hurdles. Perhaps he would become even stronger than the Ashen King—a beast of the highest caliber that she might never meet again. Margit had chosen a path to fend off any who would brazenly attempt to cut this wolf cub's journey short before he came into his own.

Staying close to Goldilocks was like chasing mist; he was impossible to get hold of and buffeted about by cryptic winds of fate.

The errant course he cut was like that of a villain's die—an ingenious hundred-sided thing, proof of an artisan's mastery of their medium and prone to wandering like a loose marble, its prevailing face changing in the merest gust. A hundred fates in motion, each the more interesting for the others in the balance.

Margit found a kind of irony in the fact that Erich never tried his hand at games where only the biggest bets would result in the biggest payouts, in which the roll of the dice could decide all...

“Now then, time for your story.”

“Yes, well... You see, Dee, sorry, Dirk saved me.”

Having heard Margit's tale for herself, there was no way another young woman could hide her own tale of love.

Kaya pushed her face into her lumpy pillow to at least hide something of her as she laid bare her hated past.

Kaya admitted, begrudgingly, that her family was famous. Kaya's full name was Kaya Asclepia Nyx. Although the Nyx family hadn't received the noble marker of "von," they were a seventeen-generation-long family of herbalists who treated knights and lesser nobles.

The Nyx family, now in charge of the public sanitation and health of the neighboring twelve cantons, started as a small lakeside hermitage and supposedly traced its origins to a child raised by alfar. Kaya's mother showed her the heirloom containing her family tree, but Kaya didn't quite know what to make of it. After all, she didn't float in the air or pass through walls like a changeling would.

What she could do, however, was concoct potions—that and read faces.

From a young age, Kaya was too clever by half. It didn't take long for her to work out why she was so valued and what it was people wanted from her. She was to be the cornerstone of the next era of the Nyx family—to draw them higher from their valued status and to carry on the bloodline so that the cantons in the region could continue to leave their mark on history. It was an important role, but a simple one. The love Kaya received came with the expectation that she would do her part to preserve the public good.

Kaya was certain that the love from her mother was genuine, but a part of her thought matters would be different if she had any siblings. There would be no other children; the wolves had claimed her father as he was gathering herbs for her mother. Perhaps this love was more an obsession—a fierce refusal to allow the family to end with her generation.

And so the talented Kaya acted as those around her wished—she didn't complain when made to study; she learned how to treat and grow the herbs that stung her hands; she always put on a kind front for those she met.

"My mother always told me, 'A doctor's smile is their most valuable asset,'" Kaya said. "A patient's hope lives and dies depending on that medicine."

Kaya was surrounded by expectations and obsessive desires. And yet, she felt a complete apathy toward both. After all, no one cared about Kaya's *own* cultivated talents. At the end of the day, all people wanted was for her to carry on the bloodline.

This stunted upbringing meant that, as much as she might have learned, she was still naive to matters of her own heart. Kaya merely acted in a manner that she felt everyone wanted from her, and so she grew despondent with the world itself. Her soul went unmoved at the bounty of spring's blooming spread out before her in the fields; she felt no twinge of heartache to see the blossoms die with season's end. As day passed to night passed to dawn, every human feeling in her remained placid, still, muted.

Smiling, Kaya explained to Margit that she had accepted that her fate was merely to heal when healing was needed—to do just as everyone wanted her to.

Then Dirk came into her life, full of swagger, demanding to be called a name he hadn't earned—wholly unlike anyone around him.

“The hell are you doing? That look doesn't suit you at all.”

These were the first words he ever spoke to her.

Kaya would never forget that night. She had been staring into the lake that her family took its name from, practicing her smiles in its moonlit reflection. She had never once smiled from the heart; it bothered her that she couldn't produce something that looked natural. So here she came, night after night once her mother had gone to sleep, to practice.

Dirk hadn't been able to sleep. His brothers had eaten every last scrap of food before he could get a hand in, and so he'd wandered the night to stave off his growling stomach and his terrible boredom.

Under the full moon that night, Kaya realized that this young boy was the only one who had seen her smile for what it was—how she moved her muscles but didn't move her heart.

His honesty had saved her in that moment. It had made her realize: *There is someone in this world that can understand me.* It was as if all the color in the

world had rushed in at once—rather, it had always been there, but never in focus. It dawned on her that being *needed* mattered far, far less to her than being *recognized*.

As Kaya explained her situation to him, Dirk didn't laugh. Weighed against her abundant blessings, he seemed to her to have far more real problems—nothing to eat, nowhere warm left to sleep. But to her amazement, the boy merely nodded and accepted every word she said.

Dirk knew what it was like to refuse the expectations put upon you.

He was the third son of a poor farming family. His life was defined by the simple expectations that he wouldn't waste the family's meager money, would help in the fields, and would go off to find work elsewhere once he had come of age. Dirk saw how his own circumstances mirrored hers; he told Kaya about how his father had struck him after he had sneaked out to join a practice session with the Watch, complaining that he was merely wasting time that could be spent in the fields.

That's not who we are! The two were bonded that night by the desire to reject their circumstances.

“He said I didn't need to force myself to smile, but when I said that if I didn't, everyone around me would be disappointed, he just said that I should picture myself sticking my tongue out at them instead.”

The most painful thing that could happen when sharing your worries was having them rejected—being told that they were pointless or insubstantial, or that other people had it worse. Someone else, someone who didn't *get it*, would have told Kaya that she just needed to *stop* smiling, to “be herself.” All it would have done was drive her back toward the pain.

Dirk didn't force her to do that. He nodded and said, “Sometimes we can't escape from our pain.” He then told Kaya his favorite ways of staving off the blues. After all, Dirk knew how much it mattered to keep people satisfied, such that the fragile homeostasis that kept him alive remained intact. He'd learned the hard way.

The boy had then gone on to give his most important piece of advice: the single most important moment to truly be yourself is right at the closing

moment of one's life, when you know the end is coming, and if you're going to live your truth, it has to be now or never again. This was no metaphor—Dirk knew kids who had lost their usefulness and had “never come back from playing outside.”

Of course, Kaya's family wouldn't do such a thing, but it was evident that if she did do a one-eighty and became an unruly child, those around her would treat her differently in turn. And so the boy told her to give as little attention as possible to those people who she didn't like or value.

“He said to me, ‘I'm gonna get big and strong and leave this backwater canton. Then I can leave my good-for-nothing dad behind, my mom who's hardly ever around, and my greedy-ass brothers. I never feel hungry when I'm thinking of the day I get to laugh 'em off and tell 'em they underestimated me!’”

“Yes, that seems very like him.”

“Which is why I want to help him.”

“Even if he doesn't wish for you to?”

“It's what I want.”

Margit's read of the situation had been dead-on. Dirk might have understood Kaya's circumstances, but he didn't think that she should have left the safety of their canton with him. He'd wanted her to find her own way out, to eventually have the latitude to learn as she wished and not as others needed of her, but in his mind there was no reason for Kaya to sink to his level and coat herself in soot. She should've looked for a place of her own to rest easy, where she could spend her days using the skills she had and pinning down what she really wanted.

On that night where Dirk resolved to become Siegfried, although he had been uncertain for a moment, he had chosen *not* to go to Kaya's house to ask her to follow.

“I had a feeling that night.”

As Kaya had been getting ready for bed that evening, she had a formless worry in the pit of her stomach. She had an inkling that the day of Dirk's

departure was near; he'd been restless lately, and she'd seen him carrying gear whose provenance was beyond her, but she had no firm evidence to be certain.

Kaya wasn't sure if it was a sixth sense of her own or divine intervention that led her to sneak out. Whatever the case, who else did she find but Dirk, kicking the sign to Illfurth as recompense for the unhappy years he had spent there.

"Dee was ready to leave all on his own. When I found him, he said I shouldn't do something stupid. In that moment, I didn't know exactly what it was I wanted myself. It was possible for me to go get the things I needed and head out with him then and there, but I didn't know what to say."

"It's not an easy decision to make. What did he say?"

"He saw me hemming and hawing and...asked me to come with him."

The huntress let out a squeal at this romantic gesture. It was the type of lovely scene worth dreaming about.

Kaya had labeled her emotions as "resolve," but anyone in love was tenacious. Margit thought that maybe Kaya had simply seen her own weakness in the moment where the boy she looked up to shined so brightly, but, well, no one wanted to have their flaws pointed out; she kept her observation to herself.

They weren't doing anything stupid like running circles around each other; they were just two young fools who each thought their love was one-sided. It was more enjoyable to simply watch the scene and let it play out. Margit decided that she would devote her energy (secondary to her own partner, of course) to protecting these two from the shadows that loomed over them. After all, she was sure that her own special someone wanted to see them full of happiness too.

Erich hadn't spoken in detail about what had happened in the Imperial capital, but Margit could tell that he had come back somewhat jaded by the world at large. Having these two allies, with their untainted lives, would be a panacea for his soul. Her partner had chosen the rough life of an adventurer instead of the glamor and glitz of Berylin; she was sure he would be thrilled at having these fresh-faced youths alongside them.

Despite getting in her first real girl talk in a long while, something was bugging Margit. Kaya obviously looked up to Siegfried and viewed him more highly than she did herself. The love between them was evident, but all the same something didn't sit right.

“By the way...why do you choose not to call him Siegfried?”

Kaya had never once called him by his chosen name, despite his furious protestations. The young man might have changed his name for auspicious purposes, but it was evident that it was backed up by a deep love for the legendary hero.

The Siegfried of legend was an exemplary hero, a valiant man who helped the weak with monstrous might and an honest heart. He had used Windslaught to slay the Foul Drake Fafnir, who had terrorized countries far and wide. Then, at the end of this quest, he had used his bounty not for his own ends, but to help those whose homes and countries had been destroyed.

“Do you know the origins of *The Adventures of Siegfried*?”

“Sorry, my home wasn't so grand as to have many books.”

“The stories of Siegfried are based on ‘The Song of Sigurd,’ about an adventurer who lived during the Age of Gods. We had a copy at home written in the Orisons.”

“Siegfried” was a modern corruption of the original pronunciation. As this new naming found its way into common parlance, his stories had evolved with the passing ages.

“Sigurd's story...doesn't end well.”

“I thought Siegfried's story was your typical ‘and they all lived happily ever after’ fare, no?”

The tale of Siegfried that Erich knew from his old world, that of the Nibelungenlied, was quite different from the one of this world, despite the commonalities between the names.

After all, in this world the Foul Drake Fafnir had, in fact, existed. As for Siegfried, he had simply been a noble young lad who had received a divine

message from the Tidal Goddess. The drake's blood had conferred no tainted immortality upon him.

According to the stories, Siegfried's talents had been acknowledged by the Tidal Goddess. The goddess's own child, the Goddess of Calm Tides, had thus sent Her apostle, the Maiden of Babbling Brooks, to deliver Siegfried a message to lead him down the path of justice. At the end of the tale, Siegfried's work is lauded by the gods and he marries the apostle, who had chosen to renounce her divinity. It was the happiest of happy endings.

Siegfried's tale had been the inspiration for so many offshoots that it almost seemed hackneyed at this point, but Kaya wasn't a literature-obsessed girl of *that* ilk. Neither was she the sort of sadist who enjoyed seeing the characters meet increasingly worse fates.

"*The Adventures of Siegfried* had been heavily altered for widespread appeal. Especially the end."

"How does the original version end?"

"The Goddess of Calm Tides and Sigurd have an illicit affair, but thrown into despair that Sigurd didn't choose Her, She kills him. In the end, the Maiden of Babbling Brooks kills herself too."

"Wow."

The huntress could see why Kaya didn't want her friend to borrow the man's name.

It was truly an awful tale—two immortals and a man whose strength had put him on their level, all noble in their deeds, sacrificed on the altar of the one among them who should have been wisest's petty, childish envy. Selfishness consumed righteousness and grief, in turn, drowned an apostle of sweet waters in the very same river that took her love. Most any poet would want to make it more palatable to the masses. The only tragedies that received higher renown than the classics were from literature lovers who wanted something that broke the mold a bit, or those prone to more than a little bit of schadenfreude.

Seeing that *this* was how the hero they'd spent the whole tale cheering on ended up would be enough to cast a funereal pall over the audience, and more

importantly, leave a lightness in the poet's pockets.

What's more it was clear that the church wouldn't have minded—or rather, had *preferred*—if the details were changed. The Goddess of Calm Tides had sent Her own apostle to this awful fate, so it was obvious that they would prefer for these less-than-savory details to remain untold. The truth, of course, would remain in their holy texts, but they would happily permit a change in the version the masses received. The almost blasphemous act of altering the story was preferable to leaving such a stain on their patron deity's reputation.

“Not only that, Sigurd himself wasn't *always* the best person. The Maiden of Babbling Brooks isn't painted in the best light either. She gives the men who try to woo her impossible tasks and sends them to their deaths. Standard fare for a deity, huh?”

“Yes, I agree with you on that one.”

Margit gave a thought to Kaya's reasoning. If Margit's own partner said that his name “Goldilocks” was a little too on the nose and that he wanted to change it to the “Golden Wolf” in homage to the Ashen King, she wouldn't hesitate to smack him round the head in annoyance. After all, the legendary wolf had been felled in the same hunt that had claimed his mate as a hostage. It was *not* auspicious for Margit in the slightest. If he ended up completely losing his mind and forcing the matter, she would stop him, even if it resulted in a couple of broken bones.

As a mercy to the boy, Kaya had never told Siegfried what she really thought about his name's ill omens. If such an honest young man found out the original story of his beloved hero had ended differently, well, it might shatter his heart. It was the height of kindness to let aspirations stay aspirations and dreams remain dreams.

The pair didn't speak for a moment as they vowed to keep this secret between them. Goldilocks would probably never find out, and even if he did, he wasn't so brutish a man as to break Siegfried's heart like that. He would probably smile and say that he preferred *The Adventures of Siegfried* to Sigurd's story anyway.

All they had to do was be careful in case they happened to meet a noble with

a penchant for the old tales. Neither Kaya nor Margit had any idea that “The Song of Sigurd” was among the most popular of the classic myths in aristocratic circles—regarded by a fair few among them as a bleak but gut-busting *comedy*.

“And...”

“And...?”

As the huntress awaited the mage’s next words, she was unaware they would make her squeal once again.

“The one who taught me how to smile wasn’t Siegfried...it was Dirk of Illfurth.”

This is a story that won’t be told here, but upon hearing this episode for himself, Erich merely muttered, “So...wholesome...” before collapsing to the ground.

[Tips] Stories enjoyed in the present age might find their origins in terrible real events where blood flowed like water. It isn’t rare for a tale’s hero to be nothing like their original namesake.

Our security clearance was suddenly elevated, to my considerable shock. As we stood on the cusp of a brutal winter, we found ourselves escaping from Infrared and making our way to Orange.

It seemed that the Association manager was a real conniving so-and-so... Ah, apologies, I should say that Friend Computer did what it must to manage such an illogical adventuring ecosystem. The manager had gone against her usual rulebook and made exceptions for me and Margit, all for the sake of lighting a fire under our fellow adventurers.

Endless threats still flourished in the realm of Marsheim. That meant an abundance of jobs where the dangers heavily outweighed the rewards. They might not have been legitimate *suicide missions*, but they were still gigs that warranted a moment’s pause to consider the consequences before recklessly signing up. Therein lay threats just like Jonas Baltlinden, who had finally met a grisly end after his long and painful public execution.

The manager wanted to send a clear message to the layabouts under her who dared to call themselves adventurers: great deeds would be rewarded appropriately. In other words, if her subordinates threw themselves into the fiery pit of hell itself, they could land an expedited ticket to a higher rank.

Even if the payout was barely worth it, the real reward lay in receiving both the Adventurer's Association and the artisan union's stamped, legitimate approval.

Above amber-orange was topaz-yellow, and above that was copper-green. At that level, despite being an adventurer, you were regarded as a proper, registered citizen. If I told you that the artisan's union would *fund* you instead of merely acting as a pawn shop, would that make the scale of this clearer?

At any rate, in her book, it didn't matter if a few hotheaded newbie adventurers bit off more than they could chew and choked in the hopes of rising through the ranks. After all, adventurers were nothing more than day laborers—surplus to population. If a party got some decent work done and never returned, then that was money and paperwork saved. I'd have bet good money that was how the Association reasoned it out, anyway.

You see, just as they weren't able with Jonas Baltlinden, Marsheim couldn't just round up its biggest names and send them off to pry thorns like Edward the Canton-Crusher and the Femme Fatale (scourge of all caravans) from the government's side. That they'd eluded capture this long proved that conventional methods weren't going to cut it.

Their new approach, then, was to use me as their golden boy to rouse the whole adventuring populace to action and thus tighten the noose around their targets' necks with overwhelming numbers.

In the same vein to how I'd landed the Baltlinden job based on the rumor that a ruby-red adventurer like myself could do essentially the work of an amber-orange without much difference, if nobles continued to hire adventurers on the cheap, said adventurers could probably use that reasoning to beg for promotions. You see, if word got out that important jobs were getting foisted upon what amounted to no-name lackeys, I was sure that it'd cause a stir among our client base. "Oh really? Are you *sure* you don't have enough money

or resources to see my request through?” was the everyday refrain among blue-blooded clients who wanted to keep their purse strings tight. The most hard-bargaining, penny-pinching Kyoto local paled in comparison to a noble’s borderline *demonic* parsimony. Lady Agrippina was living proof.

Maybe I was just letting my pessimistic side win, but I couldn’t let myself smile and nod at the promotion when I couldn’t allay the nagging feeling that the Association was using me as a lever in the ongoing economic exploitation of my fellow adventurers.

Not only that, the Association manager had links to the margrave, so it wasn’t difficult for them to do a little digging and see that I had served the count thaumapalatine herself, Count Ubiorum. I have to admit, I was sorely tempted to poke my nose in where it didn’t belong and see how His Imperial Majesty’s faithful servants were acting behind the scenes.

“Right. Let’s talk business,” I said after taking a sip of Kaya’s fragrant, homemade black tea.

We were in Kaya’s workshop up in the north quarter of the city. It wasn’t a particularly pastoral spot or anything, but it was safe and cushy relative to the rest of the city—not exactly *regal* digs, but the sort of place where a uniquely worldly sort of upper-class type might find some comfort. It was an old, small, two-story building. The walls on the first floor had all been knocked down—raising some doubts about the building’s life span in the long term—and had been converted into an herbalist’s lab. The pair hadn’t yet bought all the equipment they needed, so it was a bit barren. The medicine cabinets and the strainer for drying herbs looked a bit lonely, but I was positive it wouldn’t be long before it became fully equipped.

The second floor was made up of three rooms—two bedrooms and a storeroom. My honest thought was, *Man, these two sure have come a long way.*

Maybe this whole house situation was the reason Siegfried looked so deflated in his spot across from me. No, *deflated* wasn’t quite the phrasing—he looked like a lifeless husk.

“Hey, hey, could you perk up just a little bit? And some advice: I won’t think

any less of you, but if anyone asks if you want to do some speculative trading, say no, got it?”

“Oh quit your nagging. My gramps’s already chewed my ear off telling me not to make stupid investments. The whole reason we’re penniless farmers is ‘cause the landlord sweet-talked my great-gramps into doing some speculation himself.”

Yep, Siegfried had gotten a bit carried away wanting to provide the best for Kaya. He had somehow found himself hemorrhaging cash; Kaya had ended up breaking her usual calm facade and blew a gasket. It was no surprise, really. He could’ve picked somewhere a little bit smaller; it made me want to ask if he was ready to settle down, to be quite honest. While it was true that there was nothing wrong with having more supplies, it didn’t amount to much if you didn’t have any money left for basic necessities in the following months.

I knew Siegfried wanted to show off in front of his partner, but I couldn’t help but think, *Come on dude, couples need to talk this kinda stuff through!*

Siegfried’s foolhardy spending had led me and Margit here. There was a request we would’ve usually avoided if it were just the two of us that I thought might be good to bring to the table for our penniless comrade.

“You know it; I know it,” I said. “The snow’s getting heavier and adventuring jobs are drying up. *But*, much to my surprise, a mediator has delivered me a request from the Association.”

“A mediator?”

“Yeah. You don’t expect nobles to head to the Association and fill in forms themselves, do you? They use go-betweens when they’re dealing with the peasants and burghers and such.”

The Association building had a reception room where society’s upper crust could deign to show themselves, but it was rarely used. No matter the age or the world, it seemed that the truly rich never directly made purchases with the money they themselves owned. Merchants came to their doors to ask what they needed and if they could help out, and it was the help’s job to do the grunt work of receiving and processing it all.

Nobles could send their own people to the Association, but in the interests of anonymity it was far more common for them to hire third-party mediators. It could prove detrimental for a noble if word of their specific needs got out. It was like spies slipping each other written messages so that there was zero chance of being overheard. I had firsthand experience in Berylin's own Adventurer's Association when I worked for Lady Agrippina.

Today's request was no different. We weren't told who the client was, but it was possible to surmise who it might be from the destination.

"We're headed to the furthest reaches of the Empire—Zeufar canton. It's under the jurisdiction of Lorrach Stronghold in the Frombach Viscounty."

I wasn't certain, but we were being hired by either an Imperial noble dealing with a rowdy local strongarm, or, conversely, a local strongarm who wanted to cull the numbers of Empire-friendly adventurers.

"That ain't the sticks, that's practically another country!"

"Now, now, Dee. They're still Imperial subjects."

"Yeah, but the one with the real power's the local bigwig."

Kaya and Siegfried grew up relatively near here, so I'd been hoping that maybe they might have some distant relations in Zeufar, but sadly not. A little nepotism would grease the wheels considerably, but life wasn't so easy.

It was as Siegfried said, though. The Frombach Viscounty was almost as far out as you could go and beyond rural. If our client hadn't been so generous as to hold a few spots for us on a ship that sailed up and down the Mauser, we probably wouldn't have arrived until the spring.

"The pay's good though, bud. Even if we split the money four ways, we'll get at least one drachma apiece."

"Seriously?! A-And what do we gotta do?"

"He wants us to look into some unidentified threats plaguing his canton, maybe do some extermination work, and give his people a little latitude to rest easy at night. I don't think he knows exactly what to expect—hence the big payout."

“Oh yeah, what kinda threats?”

The request went as follows:

During the heavy rains that fell during this past autumn, a landslide had occurred up on the mountain, revealing the entrance to some ruins.

A few locals and servants of the magistrate had gone to investigate, but none had returned. Reports had started circulating that merchants and travelers passing through the area had never reached their destination. Our client wanted us to make sure there weren't any monsters or the like threatening the peace of the people of Zeufar.

If there was, in fact, nothing, then the margrave could assuage his people's minds by announcing that there was no danger. If there *was* something, then we were expected to quell it if it was within our capabilities. Part of the request was to investigate the cave, which brought with it its own dangers—translation: *hazard pay, baby*. If we found that what lurked within was truly terrible—say, for example, a cursed labyrinth that had grown up around a black blade hungry for blood and souls, left to fester and starve for centuries—they'd be happy to have us simply investigate and report back.

We'd been left with some leeway to negotiate further payment depending on what we found. We'd have to foot the bill for travel, but they were offering an advance of ten librae to put toward any preparations.

If the down payment had been half or even full price, it'd have been obvious this was one of those dangerous “No hard feelings, but...” requests that could be thrown straight into the trash. However, Mister Fidelio had kindly taught me that for direct requests, a down payment of about ten percent was standard.

The rule of adventuring society was that no matter how lauded or highly ranked you were, an adventurer could only take one request at a time. For Laurentius's operation, the fact that only one of her existed meant that they could only take their full power on one mission, or they could spread themselves a bit thinner and go for two or three at a time. Simply put, even clans had a limit to what they could do, so it wasn't rare to see clients try and raise the priority of their requests and lure in people with a higher down payment.

“Ten librae’s more than enough for preparations,” Siegfried muttered.

“Siegfried,” I asked, “did you really use up *all* that money?”

“Dee got a bit excited and bought a new spear...and went on a little shopping spree after that too...”

“Oy, Kaya! I told you to keep that between us!”

Kitting yourself out after a big payment was a pretty commonplace bad habit in this trade. Up until now he had been using the spear swiped from back home and the equipment from his bandit kills, but it seemed now that he’d won himself a moniker, he’d decided to treat himself to the best.

I completely understood, mind. Back in my old world, there was one session where I spent practically every last coin I had on a weapon, and then my GM turned to me stone-faced and said, “You do realize that next session’s going to be a few in-world months after this, right? You don’t want your character to starve, do you?” and I ended up begging him to let my Level 7 adventurer do some part-time jobs in the meantime.

“Siegfried, I say this with all the love in the world, but learn to control your wallet.”

“Yeah... I was beginning to think the same thing. When I feel good about myself, I tend to get a bit cocky... Maybe it runs in the family...”

“I totally get the feeling of wanting to get the best. So, what’d you end up getting?”

“Wait right there!”

Siegfried sped upstairs and came clattering back down with a spear. I could tell that he had been wanting to show off his new equipment, but had tamped down his excitement to avoid another chewing-out from Kaya. However, it was fair game for him to show me when asked and save face. I supposed that any boy would want to show off a new toy to his friends.

“Check it out!”

“Ooh, a masterwork weapon, I see.”

As I looked at the gleaming tip of his spear, with its own specially fitted

scabbard, I could tell that it was *cherried out*.

It was a simple, unadorned thing—clearly a function-over-form design—but well crafted. The shaft was of average length, but strangely hefty; with its full weight brought to bear it would pierce through armor. The head measured just over twelve inches, with a double-sided blade. It was thicker in the middle, and the edges were finely engraved with blood grooves for a nastier cut and a cleaner follow-through.

It stood around two meters from tip to bottom. The weighty shaft helped to allay the imbalance that came from its top-heavy head. The metal core had been sheathed in wood composite to further even out the balance, then coated in a blue-black varnish. It felt good to hold.

The weapon was suitable for marching with, and as long as Siegfried didn't find himself in a tiny box, it was suitable for most conditions.

If I had to nitpick, well-balanced spears like these ran heavier than the cheaper ones on the market.

“What's the name?”

“Doesn't have one yet. I wanna think of something cool. I actually got a pretty good deal, y'know? The craftsman said he wanted to surpass his boss one day and had crafted it to prove his stuff to him. 'Cause of that he sold it to me for cheap—said it was a practice piece.”

“I don't think three drachmae is that cheap...”

“Grah, Kaya! Only soldiers who serve knights get to wield something *this* good, you know?! Plus he said he was gonna sell it for *five* drachmae, but said that he'd make a little discount if he could contribute to the great Siegfried's stories!”

I had to agree with Siegfried here—for a completely mundane weapon, he paid a fair price for good materials and sound craftwork. You could tell that the artisan, despite being early in his career, knew how to handle a spear himself and had made something that you couldn't really fault.

All the same, it wasn't the *best* deal, and I wasn't completely on board with making such a big purchase after buying a *whole freaking workshop*. Maybe he

had gotten a bit ahead of himself for splurging on something that my family would have to spend a year working to afford.

Still, Kaya had given him more than his fair share of flak for it, so I graciously told him, “Congrats on finding such a good partner.” But it was time to get back to the matter at hand.

“All right, should we set your spear to good use, then? It’s too good for silly jobs in the city, isn’t it?”

“We can’t have amber-orange and ruby-red adventurers wasting their time cleaning gutters, can we?”

It was just as Margit said—there were barely any decent jobs left. Even if we did manage to find ourselves an amber-orange job, a lot of the work in circulation this season wasn’t exactly *honest*; desperate adventurers made for a predatory job market. Considering the danger and the amount of time they would consume, none were adventures that you would choose to stick at despite the cold.

“Ahh, well, if we gotta, then sure. How long d’you need to prepare, Kaya?”

“I should be able to prepare some potions and rations if I have five days. It would eat through most of our advance, but I think some extra preparations wouldn’t hurt. We’ll need a Bright-Eyes potion and extra rations, just in case. We’ll want some sweet stuff too, to give us an energy boost when we need it—all the bare necessities.”

“Okay, five days it is.”

“Oh, we’ll be on a boat, so maybe I should make some seasickness potions? I think there was a recipe in one of the books I brought from home...”

When it came to Kaya’s preparations, Siegfried nodded along without a single doubt or concern.

“By the way, Kaya, what ingredients do you need for the potions?” I asked.

“Nothing you can really get around here. I picked a few herbs during some previous jobs, but I was planning to buy any surplus from the wholesaler if need be.”

“If you need it, I’ve got a person who can sell you them for cheap.”

Siegfried squinted at me when I gave the name, but he didn’t need to worry. Yes, a villain she might have been, but business was business—her goods were trustworthy. To top it off, she wasn’t a fool in a position to pick a fight with the party who’d purged the lands of the Infernal Knight now, was she?

[Tips] There is no upper limit to a weapon’s price. Mass-produced weapons for wartime can be bought for cheap, but well-made named weapons could set you back years’ worth of wages. The prized swords on a noble’s or knight’s waist could be leveraged against an entire territory.

Locations with good airflow were the ideal environment to dry out herbs and increase their shelf life, and one such warehouse could be found in a newly developed area of Marsheim. Owned by the Baldur Clan, it dealt with various herbal wholesalers whom the clan had laid a claim to and also functioned as a storage spot for their raw materials. Though their goods usually weren’t for sale to the general public, I decided to send a letter saying that I wanted in and received a swift reply saying that I could come to make a purchase whenever I liked.

“Wow, everything here is of such high quality. You can tell that they’ve been taken care of well after picking,” Kaya said.

“Quite right! All of them have been carefully collected by adventurers using our own patented techniques,” one of the warehouse staff explained.

If a pro like Kaya seemed satisfied with the stock on offer, I didn’t have much to worry about. At a huge half-price discount—nearly wholesale—it seemed like a big win right off the bat for our next adventure.

“But my oh my... Color me surprised... To think that a little bodyguard job...could have led to all this...” Nanna said.

“I would’ve preferred it a little later on in my career, if I’m being honest,” I said. Well, as long as she didn’t ask me to do anything too below board, I wasn’t about to complain.

While Kaya was picking over the goods, Nanna and I were talking up on a raised viewing area from which you could observe the whole open warehouse. The letter of approval had come directly from Nanna, and she had been personally waiting for us when we'd arrived. I'd taken the Baldur Clan's boss aside to talk to her, hoping to keep Kaya from getting too involved with her.

I wasn't all that worried. Ever since my second "warning," it looked like Nanna wouldn't do anything beyond her usual duties as clan leader. The burned scraps in the corner of the room that had once been a delicately painted miniature were proof that my wordless threat had achieved its intended effect.

I had sent a letter to Lady Leizniz a little earlier—just a cute little seasonal greeting that ever so gently hinted that I knew Nanna. A reply came before too long saying that the Queen Pervert Extraordinaire was worried about Nanna and asking me to let her know if I knew where she might be. Along with it came a miniature portrait depicting a gloomy-looking girl linking arms with another girl wearing glasses. The miserable child looked just like Nanna, minus fifteen years and a layer of potion abuse.

In other words, my shot in the dark had hit its mark dead-on: Nanna *had* been a direct pupil of the head of one of the College's Five Great Pillars.



The picture might have been burned to tiny scraps, but fortunately for me, so had any possibilities of Nanna luring me on any kind of unwanted errand. In other words, she had received my intent loud and clear: I can expose your weak point at any time, so don't even *dare* to involve me in your dirty work again.

I wouldn't do anything barbaric like ask her to fork over her stock for free; I was more than happy with her generous discount. I was equally happy to help with any of her legit jobs—services rendered for just cause and refused for mindless profit. There was no reason we couldn't maintain a civil, strictly on the level “you scratch my back, I scratch yours” arrangement.

I didn't want to use the Baldur Clan as a stepping stone to forge my own giant clan in Marsheim, no way. That was the wheelhouse of a wannabe thug, not an adventurer. Even if I was living that kind of life, going around trying to pull all the gangs together is the sort of thing that gets you assassinated in Van Cortlandt Park in the middle of a summit to kick off some other guys' story. All I wanted was a little assist with helping some newbie adventurers live upright lives—a message that I had delivered in a gentlemanly, Collegiate style.

And now here we were, standing side by side as we watched an overjoyed herbalist awe at all the wonderful reagents right there at her fingertips.

If our relationship had imploded into tiny bits because of what I'd done, then there would no doubt be a corpse decorating this room right now. Mind you, I wasn't sure precisely *whose* it would be. I had planned some safety measures, but despite her emaciated state, Nanna was still a former pupil of Lady Leizniz—there was no ignoring the possibility that she had a deadly ace up her sleeve. I wasn't confident enough to assume that she hadn't cobbled together something even more potent than what she threw at us the first time we'd met.

However, here we were talking together, both very much alive—proof enough of what we both wanted from this situation.

Should circumstances call for it, I wouldn't hesitate to part that head from its emaciated body and discard it in a ditch somewhere. Sometimes to enjoy a campaign, a party's got to take a real firm “search and destroy” approach. Everyone at my old game table had their own idea of what lines they'd cross to get what they want, and in my case, there was plenty of heartless, amoral

behavior I'd decided was worth the payoff. What manga was it where that guy said, "A fight's not a fight unless both sides are of equal strength?"

"About the task...in Zeufar..."

"Ah, so you've heard about it?"

"Let's just say...this world...is brimming with people...who find simple things like sleeping...difficult."

I smiled back at her implication that the Baldur Clan had eyes even within the Association. Nanna wasn't revealing this card because she was trying to threaten me—it was proof of our cooperation.

"It is...awfully shady, though... You see...your mediator...is often used by small-time nobles...on good terms with the Empire."

"You did your homework in a short amount of time. But surely that would mean that our mediator has given us an upright gig?"

"Viscount Frombach...is in the Imperial capital...on social business, you realize? Very odd...considering that he hardly leaves his territory...due to his usual job...of safeguarding the region."

Hmm... So the one who would give final approval is absent in Berylin? Not only that, he's in charge of a viscounty plagued by local strongmen...

Nobles were busy even in winter, and there were always people poised to take advantage of this—mercenaries who set up camp in order to threaten cantons until spring; bandits who took advantage of fewer patrols. For the time being, the viscount would have to appeal to his subordinates in order to crack down on these dangers.

Frombach was based in a region under the margrave's jurisdiction and therefore not closely involved in the center of politics, so what reason did he have to head to the capital? It would take three whole months to reach Berylin from here—maybe a month by drake, but that would severely limit his options in terms of baggage and passengers. If it was such a bare-bones voyage, then the only real reason I could think of was that he wanted to make sure that the social circles he was involved in remembered what he looked like.

“I would recommend...casting your net...around issues such as these too. It’s difficult...to adventure while completely ignoring the real world...like the saint does.”

“A tricky issue, it seems.”

My own information network was as good as nonexistent. Most of what I heard was secondhand knowledge or pure rumor.

Nanna was basically saying this: if I wanted to be an upright adventurer nowadays in Marsheim, then I needed a means to distance myself from troublesome matters. If I dug deeper, I would probably find that she was trying to say that she would supply this information if I allied myself with the Baldur Clan.

The Baldur Clan had steadily been gaining more prestige since the incident with the Exilrat, and they’d have nowhere to go but up if they managed to incorporate a party with amber-orange adventurers—the one that toppled Jonas Baltlinden to be precise—into their operation. However, I had refused to so easily be subsumed. That was the reason Nanna was extending such a thinly veiled invitation—implying I should form an organization of my own with which she could form an alliance.

It wasn’t a complete impossibility. Margit and I had barely used our funds, so it wouldn’t be too difficult to get started. That wasn’t all—thanks to Limelit and the Catchpenny Scribbler’s work, I had also amassed a bit of spare experience. If I was honest, I wanted to pour it all into sword-related skills, but the fact of the matter was that I was short on allies who could do behind-the-scenes work—gathering intel during the Investigation Phase. Unless I wanted to solve everything with my fists, I needed to get some social skills. I’d reach a dead end before long if I let myself become a meathead who couldn’t pass the regular gamut of simple skill checks.

“Man, settling down somewhere is easier said than done, huh?”

“If you dislike it...then you should’ve...settled down somewhere more rural. Maybe become...a bodyguard in a teeny canton...or somewhere else even more peaceful.”

I wasn’t thinking that I’d made a mistake. Marsheim was an ideal place to

become an adventurer. I was blessed with talented seniors and I had found reliable comrades. It was true I had to deal with some annoying people, but they were *far* more preferable than nobles. Not only that, there was a good range of jobs here when all was said and done.

If I put down roots back home and started my own Adventurer's Association in Old Town, then I'm sure it would have come with its own set of problems. Wherever you went, people were the same. Trials and tribulations cropped up like weeds no matter the location. I was happy to be content with my current lot and what I had gained.

A clan, huh? It's not really my cup of tea to be the leader of a big organization. All the same, it's not out of the question if it means continuing to live a life of adventure. But please. For now—at least for now, let me enjoy the simple life of adventuring.

The type of storyline where the hero saves his country or the world wasn't completely out of the question, but I wanted that to come further down the line. I'd think about it *later*—when I became strong enough to get through any problems that could be solved with a sword on my own.

“Thanks for the advice.”

“Right... But take care. The bigwigs...they're strangely active... But, dearie me... Just when I found a capable bodyguard...you jump right out of an easy pay range.”

The mysterious clan head muttered to herself about finding more cheap labor as swirls of smoke enveloped her. I internally reaffirmed the truth that no matter where you went, it was impossible to avoid trouble.

[Tips] Social etiquette dictates that it is fine to smoke in the presence of others only when they are of the same status as you, with an exception for those who find themselves at the top of the social ladder. It is likely that Erich did not air his qualms during this meeting as a strictly magnanimous gesture.

“I'm never...getting on a boat again... When we're done, I'm walking back to Marsheim...”

“You’re not serious, are you, Sieg? Spring will be here by the time you get back! You’re lucky Kaya made you a seasickness potion.”

“Y-Yeah, if she hadn’t, I would’ve barfed my guts onto the deck days ago...”

Our three-day excursion on the Mauser River had come to a close. It would have taken a horse an age to cover the distance we’d already traveled. I had to hand it to humanity’s most efficient means of transportation—there was a reason it had never ceded its crown, even during the era of flight.

All the same, it had been quite the mission for an untested soul. I’d put my own semicircular ducts through the wringer from horse riding and non-Euclidian travel, so I was fine, but it always took time to adjust to one’s first time on a boat. That went doubly for mensch like Kaya and Siegfried.

It was true that it didn’t compare to the ocean, but the Mauser was still a great river used as a transport network. The waves and the sound of the water were inescapable, so for those without sea legs, it was probably difficult to even get to sleep. Siegfried looked to be a particularly bad case; I had often spotted him inadvertently “feeding the fish.”

“Ngh... Thank the gods we’re on land. My head’s still spinning.”

“Y-You feeling okay, Dee?”

“I should be asking you that, K-Kaya... Also...call me Siegfried...”

As the pair did their usual routine while they stood on the brink of total exhaustion, I felt a little bad for them. We still had a little ways to go to reach Zeufar canton. It would take around two days on foot, give or take. The river route meant that I’d had no choice but to leave behind my beloved Dioscuri. If I pushed my two new friends a little too hard I imagined our shoes would be covered in vomit before too long.

We had set off to a slow start, and we ended up taking more breaks than we’d planned—the road was harder going than I’d expected. We arrived in Zeufar two days later than scheduled.

The request stated that they wished for us to solve the issue or at least deliver a report during the winter months, so we were pressed for time. People spent more time at home in their canton during the winter, so I imagined they wanted

this sorted before the work began to prep the fields as the thaw set in.

“Huh? Adventurers?”

Yet for some reason, our exhausted party didn't receive the welcome we'd envisioned.

“Yes. We received a report that a cave had been uncovered recently and something had been threatening people nearby.”

“Ahh, right. Yes, we sent a report to the magistrate, but we didn't appeal for any outside help, really...”

Zeufar translated to “lakeside canton” if you poked around deep enough in the etymology, and in fact many cantons of the same name could be found all throughout the Empire. It's a bit like how America has a bunch of towns and cities that are all named “Springfield.” True to its namesake, the Zeufar that we had arrived at was a developing canton next to a beautiful lake. It was still a small community of just under two hundred folk. Their chief livelihood came from two areas: farming (sustained by irrigation from the lake) and forestry (from areas that I presumed simply hadn't yet been converted into farmland). The lake was connected to the river, and so produce was easily delivered to neighboring towns. It was your stereotypical community that probably would be swallowed up by the tides of history and perhaps one day reemerge somewhere down the line.

What was bugging me was that the village head didn't know we were coming.

“Well, we asked for help dealing with some wolves, and there have been one or two folk who got lost in the woods, but... *Achoo!*”

The village head apologized as he blew his nose. He went on to tell us that he didn't know who exactly it was who had brought us here, but he was unable to pay us. Before he left, he summoned one of his men over to show us to the mountain in question.

“Ey up, lads an' lasses. Young fowk've been makin' a big ol' fuss 'bout cave, bu' no one's really all tha' bovered 'bout it. Some fowk were chattin' 'bout zome kid goin' off to check it out bu'... *Achoo!*”

The elderly gentleman who we'd been left with spoke in a form of Imperial

speech that was peppered with remnants of a local dialect, making it a bit difficult to parse. He was eyeing us with suspicion too, but still led us to the edge of the forest where the woodcutters worked. The man kept sniffing as he walked, and I began to worry for the people in this community. *Everyone here's dealing with some upper respiratory crud. Are they not keeping warm enough?*

“There t’is. Have a gander at tha’ mount’n up there. Zee it? ’Tween tha’ peak an’ tha’ peak.”

The gentleman pointed his mud-stained finger up at a mountain flanking the low mountain that they used for woodcutting. Other than the fact that the trees in the distance were of a darker hue than those that were being felled—I wondered what varieties of tree grew hereabouts—the snow-covered sight was your average rural landscape.

“I don’ min’ you goin’, but watch yerselves, gotcha? Got wolf packs ’round ’ere. Half a year ago had a kid go missin’, weren’t great tell you tha’. Li’l sprout was only four. Not comin’ home means yer as good as dea’, so held the fun’ral already.”

“Wolves? Does this canton not have a hunter?”

“Chuffin’ hell, we got nowt so fancy ’ere. Zome braver fowk’ve been playin’ hunter, but tha’s ’bout it... *Wachoo!*”

As he finished talking, he let out such a bellowing sneeze that I wanted to scold him for not even bothering to cover his mouth. Margit leaped back less in surprise and more to avoid the spray.

Ugh, seeing everyone sneeze is making my own nose twitch...

“Only get ’em in cantons where the village head’s up to zuff. Won’t get a magistrate-approved hunter ovverwise.”

“We had one in Illfurth, but in some other areas nearby, local people hunt for game.”

“Hah, ain’t got nobles visitin’ to play hunter ’round here. Trust me—ain’t got enough coin for owt like a hired hunter an’ tha’s tha’.”

My own canton was definitely more rural than urban, but all the same it was

looked after with enough attention that you would see the magistrate's knights during festivals. Not only that, Margit's family expanded their hunting area to help keep the other towns in the area safe. I didn't see why this man thought that you needed noble hunters looking to kill time or officially sanctioned ones.

In addition to the apparent dearth of hunters, we passed a total of zero guards on the walk down. It was becoming clear to me that the logic I'd spent years amassing didn't really apply to a small canton which was only viewed with a passing interest by the local authorities. It felt kind of like leafing through a new supplement for a TRPG you're already quite familiar with.

Unfortunately my excitement was dampened by my own huge sneeze. Sniffing your snot back up went against manners here, so I apologized before quietly wiping my nose with a pocket handkerchief. How low had I sunk to sneeze in the presence of others? I was sure Lady Agrippina wouldn't ask me to come back if she could see just how tainted I had been by the laid-back nature of common society.

"Righto, here we are. Was told to take you lot to edge of canton."

"Thank you very much. Prithee give our regards to the village head."

I gave my thanks so that our evidently chilly guide could head back, but he stood still for a moment, as if to ask what the hell a "prithee" was. *Maybe I should learn a bit more country speak... Don't want to be seen as a stuck-up city boy.*

"What's the plan?" Siegfried asked.

"Let's see. It's still early in the day, so why don't we get a bit closer before pitching up for the night? I'd like to get our investigation done quickly tomorrow and be back in Zeufar before dark."

"Yeah, but we haven't asked the locals about what's happening! The heroes in the stories always begin with a bit of interviewing."

"You saw him, right? I don't think anyone here would be able to give us anything useful even if we asked."

"Right... Which means it'd be quicker for us to see it for ourselves, gotcha."

Neither the village head nor our guide—whose opinion most likely was closer to that of the average person here—seemed all too interested in the rumors that brought us here. I doubted there would be much point in wasting time with interviews. Having your son or daughter go missing wasn't an uncommon occurrence in the countryside, so if we went around from house to house I expected that the most we'd pick up is bits of gossip and idle complaints. I didn't want to waste time anyway. I doubted a rural canton like this had anything that resembled an inn, and the village head wouldn't be lending us a room with the way he looked at us.

That left us with one ideal plan of action: to set up camp near the cave tonight and get our investigation over and done with by sundown tomorrow. Getting things done lickety-split, no distractions allowed, helped your GM make the last train home. Jokes aside, such optimism was predicated on there not being something else at play.

“Saying that, don't drop your guard, Siegfried.”

“Huh, why? Seems like just some average cave if you ask me.”

“You didn't forget, did you? At the end of the day, this request was given by a noble looking to make his people feel safe. I doubt we managed to end up in the wrong canton, so I don't think we should get too comfortable.”

“Ah, right. They were pretty indifferent, huh? That probably means something...”

“You can drop out now, you know?”

I said this only half joking, but Siegfried rebuffed me immediately.

“You outpaced me *again* with your rank. What pisses me off is that I know you ain't pulling anything underhanded. Dealing with this stupid cave is all part of catching up with you. No way I'm gonna let the client leave a black mark on my name because I came back from the job without even doing it properly.”

“Then let's do this.”

Yet again I saw the qualities of a main character in him.

If I were an explorer instead of an adventurer, I probably would have started

heading home right about now; the whole affair was just too fishy. Then again, I expected my poor luck would find its way to force me into the investigation somehow, like a relative vanishing or something.

“If we don’t find anything, we can do a little wolf hunting and go home.”

“Don’t look down on wolf hunting, if you wouldn’t mind,” Margit chimed in.

“Sorry, sorry. It’s only because we have such a capable scout with us that I was.”

I placed a hand on Margit’s shoulder as if to say, “You’ve got our backs, right?” She shook her head in exasperation and grinned as she led the way for our pack of slow two-legged adventurers.

[Tips] Even jobs issued by statesmen might go unnoticed by the populace they are meant to serve.

“Hey, Erich?”

“Yeah, Siegfried?”

Siegfried was sitting at the campfire on the first watch. The party had set up camp on a nearby mountain and Erich was just setting up his bedding.

“I hate bringing up my stupid, boring past, but I helped my gramps with forestry stuff.”

“Really? I didn’t realize farming families also did woodcutting.”

“The landlord wanted to increase the size of his fields; he tapped us to clear the land. We didn’t really have a choice in the matter. Anyway, it ain’t a lot, but I know a bit about trees.”

Siegfried’s grandfather was old enough to have retired, but the poverty that haunted the family had killed off any possibility of spending his twilight years in rest and relaxation. With no sizable income for himself, the thin old man had no choice but to accept the request to clear land for fields that didn’t even belong to him. Siegfried had dutifully taken up a share of the task.

The experience had left him with more than a passing knowledge of

Marsheim's trees, but also with lumber brought in from afar, and to top it off, Kaya sometimes showed him some of her illustrated books when they hung out together.

“What I'm getting at is that I've *never* seen trees like the ones in that forest before.”

“Now that you mention it...neither have I.”

The party had chosen a space with a good view of the forested mountain where the cave was located. Not only were the trees foreign to Siegfried, strangely enough, they only covered this one mountain. The neighboring mountains were full of the same trees that surrounded their campsite, yet their destination was covered in a perfect coat of these strange specimens—it looked as if someone had imported a whole forest worth of foreign imports, all carefully cared for over generations to make it perfectly uniform.

Mountains host to a strict arboreal monoculture did exist, but these were contingent on factors like unique soil or human intervention. This canton's woodcutters had only reached as far as the forest near the actual settlement, so it made no sense for them to have set up a lumber plantation all the way out here first.

“Ain't it weird? Not only that, I can't see any trace of a landslide from here.”

“Yeah, I had a look with a spyglass, but I couldn't make out anything either.”

“So who's the one who made a fuss saying they'd found some suspicious cave? Our guide and the village head didn't seem to give a toss about it, but it was a big enough story to go around among the younger lot, right?”

“Yeah... More and more questions.”

Siegfried had a bad feeling about this—just as Erich had realized in Zeufar, the whole situation was at odds with the info they had received before. It was evident that Erich hadn't lied to him. Kaya had read the letter too, and she didn't have any reason to take the penniless Siegfried on a wild goose chase. No, Goldilocks was an enigmatic sort, but Siegfried no longer had any reason to think that his fellow adventurer was a devious, underhanded character.

Which meant that this was like many of his favorite stories where the heroes

were tricked by a false request... But who had anything to gain from tricking the four of them? Siegfried couldn't think of a single sound explanation. There was nothing to gain from teasing some fledgling adventurers with a reward after already giving them a down payment of ten librae. If the person behind the scenes had merely wished to support some adventurers out of the kindness of their heart, then they could have just given them the money without this rigmarole of a fake quest.

If, on the other hand, they were being steered into the waiting jaws of some horror on the mountain in need of a sacrifice, then there was a whole settlement right there down at the foothills. There was no reason to call a measly pack of adventurers from afar and create suspicion with the Association after they went missing.

Siegfried just couldn't wrap his head around the situation. He had no clue what the client wanted in bringing them here. Did they need this party specifically, or would anyone have sufficed?

Erich had said that maybe the authorities wanted someone to just come back with the announcement that they'd investigated, but his postulations remained just that—an answer would only come with a firsthand investigation.

"There are two types of adventurers when a situation like this arises," Erich said.

"What're you on about?"

"First: those who sense something's afoot and turn back. They investigate the client and give him a good beating after they find it was a trap all along."

"Jeez, talk about barbaric."

"Second: those who emerge safely from the trap due to their own abilities. They then return to the client with words of thanks and a few fists of recompense."

"They're the same!"

Erich laughed at Siegfried's apposite remark. The corners of his lips then raised to form an even more devilish smile.

“An adventurer isn’t someone who cowers in the face of fear. Neither do they let someone look down on them. See the difference between the two types now?”

“Yeah, yeah. I ain’t gonna split hairs over that logic.”

An adventurer ventured into the unknown and used their strength and wit to emerge from the other side. It didn’t matter whether human agency played a part in compelling the adventure—what needed to be done remained unchanged. The difference lay in the result—the valiant who saw their mission through to the end would find their names lining the pages of a saga.

A hero sallied forth into dangers unknown. Only those who lived safe, coddled lives could find time to worry about their safety.

“Well, there actually *is* a way to find out if this whole thing is dangerous or not.”

“You can do that?! Come on man, mention that earlier!”

“Sorry, but it wouldn’t be possible right now even if I could.”

Goldilocks looked up. The waxing gibbous moon and the stars that followed in its wake scudded across the clear night sky. It was a good night. There was no danger of snow flurries and no sign that the weather would suddenly change. There were no clouds in the distance; the wind was calm.

Those blessed with magic would be able to see that the False Moon was waning and the alfar, usually so busy with their mischief, were quiet.

“You an astrologist as well?”

“No way. Plus, the gods don’t deliver Their divine messages through the stars. I was just thinking that I don’t feel fully up to snuff when the full moon is close.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

Erich let out a cryptic laugh and simply said, “Every adventurer has a few tricks that he keeps hidden even from his allies,” to which Siegfried had no rebuttal. It was a common trope since the Age of Gods for the hero to say, “I’d been saving this in case of something like this,” before whipping out a new move or weapon to save their allies right in the nick of time. Siegfried didn’t yet

have something he could call an ace up his sleeve, but he dreamed of one day doing so, and so he held back from forcing Goldilocks's hand. It would be the height of boorishness.

If actively hiding something were to mess up the coordination of the party, then it would be fine to punch the answer out of an ally, but in all other cases sleeping dogs were best left to lie. Once the dust had settled and the adventurers were safely home, the surprise save would be a particularly large pearl to adorn the story with.

"You better not take any secrets to your grave, got it?"

"Of course. I doubt the scales would weigh up my secrets over my comrades' lives...I think. Yeah."

"Say it with some more conviction, man! *Please?!'*"

The hero-hopeful threw another piece of wood on the fire while reaffirming to himself the spine-chilling truth that Goldilocks was truly an unfathomable beast.

[Tips] Choosing to take on a request or not is completely at your behest. However, do not forget that it is the GM who decides what experience points should be scribbled down. It is those who lose sight of the true aim of adventure who miss chances to grow.

"The forest is too quiet," Margit murmured to herself as we reached the wooded foothills of our target mountain. She turned to the rest of us. "I'm not seeing any sign of wolves. It's strange... The bears should all be hibernating by now, but the deer and boar are still giving the whole area a wide berth."

The next day had come, and we were beginning our search for the cave just as the sunlight began to filter through the trees. Any traces of the supposed landslide couldn't be seen from our camp, so we had decided to comb the mountain on the off chance it just wasn't visible from where we had been.

"Ugh, I just don't see it... Do you, Kaya?"

"Sorry, me neither."

“Come on,” Margit said. “The quality of the grass is completely different.”

Sad to say, I was just as hopelessly outclassed as Siegfried and Kaya. We needed the obvious signs like hoofprints or broken branches to even have a chance of working out the movements of the local fauna, while Margit could see what animals had passed by simply by looking at the leaves and sticks on the ground. This was no natural arachne gift at work—this was a skill honed to near instinct. My partner was truly something else.

The proficiency of a party’s scout can decide the chances of their survival. Talented scouts have an eye for even the smallest bits of information; someone of Margit’s caliber wouldn’t let us get ambushed even from *behind*. A common piece of advice in the adventuring community was that every party needed at least one scout.

I remember me and my friends had an absolutely *terrible* time of it when we started a fresh session without any party planning beforehand, leaving us without a ranger. Every encounter had begun with us on the back foot, and we had to brute force our way through every trap as our hit points dwindled. Before our second session I decided to forgo my class’s recommended build and focus on creating a character that would keep us alive.

It bore repeating that we were well and truly blessed to have Margit with us.

“Anyway, the tracks are relatively fresh. The animals here began to avoid this forest only recently.”

“Something made them want to avoid the area so much that they abandoned their territory?”

“More animals than you think vary up their hunting routes, but such a marked change suggests that *something* happened. Think about us—we might not take the same path to the Association building every day, but we would only take the long way round if there was a real reason to, right?”

Margit had a point. When the weather was nice we would take the shortest route, which was chiefly a dirt track, but when it was raining we would take the longer but more well-maintained way there. Animals followed the same logic. Of course, there were some animals who didn’t stick to fixed patterns so much or took their time as they went, but these were apparently fringe cases.

“That’s not all, look over there—the trees thin out. That’s most likely where the landslide hit.”

Margit pointed up at a spot where the mountain looked slightly barer. It didn’t look to be that large of a landslide, from the number of felled trees. I imagined that it would have made a fair clamor, but definitely nothing so cataclysmic as to drive every last animal from the forest.

“Well, well, well, looks like we’ve finally got something to go on,” Siegfried said. “To top it off, the trees here are massive...”

It was as Siegfried had said. We’d been able to tell from a distance that the whole mountain’s trees looked like nothing we’d seen anywhere else, but it was only up close that it registered just how *huge* they were. Multiple trunks sprouted from their bases, and the bark was an eerie black. Even if we linked arms, we wouldn’t reach around even the thinnest of the lot.

“Crap...!”

“What is it?!” I said, looking over at Siegfried.

“I wanted to learn more about the tree by cutting into it, but it chipped my damn dagger! That ain’t normal! I picked this up in the last battle and made sure it wasn’t a crap one or anything!”

It was a difficult task to fell a tree with a dagger, but for the bark to remain completely undamaged was *not* normal.

“Hmm, it’d be good to have a sample of the wood to take back in case we need to back up our story.”

“H-Hey, I’m not risking ruining my sword *or* spear on these things!”

“Yeah, agreed. My father would cry if his beloved blade broke from me playing lumberjack.”

I placed a hand upon a tree, but it didn’t seem abnormal to the touch. Even if they weren’t completely invincible, I had the feeling we were better off leaving the trees alone for the time being.

In truth, the Craving Blade wouldn’t break even in a little experiment like this, but I heard its horrible, plaintive song telling me that it did *not* want to be used

as an axe. More importantly, I didn't want Siegfried to see my secret, horrid friend. I had worked so hard in getting Siegfried to like me, but he might totally bail if he found out I was cursed by such an evil-looking thing. The Craving Blade was an absolute end-of-the-road measure to be brought out when the only other option was running away with my tail between my legs.

"This is proof enough that *something* weird is going on here. A strangely quiet mountain and trees that can break a decent dagger. We'll need one or two more pieces of evidence before we can go back to the client and say that this was out of our hands."

"Let's head up. I mean, we'll be safe from wolves and stuff, right?"

"Yes, I don't sense any foes ahead, and..."

Margit's words were interrupted by a sneeze; she wiped her nose, her hood hiding her embarrassment.

"Everyone's been sneezing a lot since yesterday," I murmured.

"Well yeah, 'cause it's cold as all hell out here."

"I know, but..."

But Margit sneezing while on the job? Her hunter's training drilled the importance of mastering every source of involuntary noise that could alert her quarry into her very soul. In my case, I'd also done my fair share of training in self-control to make sure I was a presentable servant; this was just...weird.

I started to wonder if the trees were to blame. I'd read somewhere that hay fever was a malaise of the modern age, but maybe it was just so commonplace that no one in the past had bothered to write about it... But then again, it was the middle of winter. Even cedar trees, which were particularly early pollinators, only began to shed when the coldest part of winter was over. I racked my brains to puzzle out what exact mischief was being played on us.

We had begun our ascent of the mountain to find an answer to these mysteries. Just as it was dawning on me how easy the mountain was to climb—there were few bushes or roots—Margit, about twenty paces ahead, lifted her hand. The sign was clear: *stop*. We had all agreed on nonverbal signals if necessary, and so we obeyed.

“There’s a path that way. It’s old.”

“A path? All the way out here?”

“Like I said, it’s quite old. What’s weird is that it doesn’t seem like someone cut through the trees to make it...”

The trail was too small for a carriage, but more than wide enough for a horse. Margit’s words echoed in my head—it seemed almost like the trees had formed a deliberate corridor. The question then was, were these trees always like this? Or had they been moved recently?

“The path leads to the landslide site,” I said.

“Ooh, then we’re getting somewhere.”

Siegfried’s voice was quavering...but I chalked it up to excitement, not nervousness. After all, a shiver went through me too, given the veritable smorgasbord of anomalies laid out before us.

I wondered if we might have walked into a scenario that was on the level of Mister Fidelio and his ilk. One of those ones that begins with bored veterans sitting in a pub and the barkeep calls out, “I’ve got something that might interest ya, a task that requires some skill...”

I pushed down the lingering sense of unease in my stomach as we continued our ascent. Eventually we came upon the source of the landslide. The thing waiting for us there wasn’t exactly a cave. Instead of a simple opening into the face of the mountain, we found an incomprehensible tangle of tree roots forming an entryway. The dirt and debris that had fallen away to reveal it had partially buried a small hut nearby.

“Yeah, this won’t do. Let’s burn it all down.”

“Whoa, hold it, man! What’re you chattin’ about?!”

A suspicious atmosphere oozed from the hole; the air was thick with mana. I was certain it was an ichor maze or something of the sort. Whatever lay at its core was going to be bad news for *anyone*. Why was I so sure? This wasn’t my first rodeo—the bothersome blade nagging at the corners of my thoughts for just a *crumb* of slaughter had passed into my hands the last time I’d run

headlong into such an obvious portal of evil.

We couldn't have been sure that this was an ichor maze until we stood right by it because it either wasn't trying to expand or was doing a damn good job of hiding itself. Whatever the case, both this ichor maze and all the trees on this damn mountain were better off gone.

Don't think I'm just gonna head home and leave you here, nuh-uh!

I pulled out a certain catalyst—it was time to let the Daisy Petal bloom.

It was no longer viable for me to hide the fact that I could use magic from my new comrades. It would be best to immolate the maze in one go. If I threw my mystic thermite right in there, I assumed it would be more than sufficient to do the job.

My thoughts were cut off the next moment. The forest must have sensed the imminent danger; it felt as if the mountain itself was shaking. Like a beast shaking off dew, a whole flurry of powder snow erupted around us.

Next came a symphony of sneezing.

"Achoo! What the... Wachoo!"

"Crap... Achoo! The pollen!"

I could almost see the GM smirking as they doled out a punishment for not solving the problem the intended way. Every tree in the vicinity must have known what I was about to do, and so they had expelled a haze of pollen despite the natural order. No, that wasn't quite right—they had always been shedding pollen, but now they were getting *serious*.

Dammit! We were wandering through the maze's territory without even realizing it!

"L-Let's first... Achoo! Head over there!"

Kaya was pointing at the hut. It was half buried, but there was no time to think about whether it was safe or not. It was evident this pollen would get through my Insulating Barrier. It'd wring every duct and gland in every orifice in our faces dry; our throats would feel like they were being raked with thousands of needles. There'd be no way we could make it down the mountain at this rate.

Our airways would be ruined by the pollen, or we'd suffer from oxygen deprivation from coughing fits before we made it even halfway down. Not only that, it was already taking a toll on our vision—we would lose each other in no time at all. In the absolute best-case scenario, we would be reduced to a pathetic party of scrubs in need of a more experienced party to clean up our mess.

I inwardly swore as I dashed into the hut with my party, our faces streaked with tears and mucus. We were lucky. The hut retained its integrity despite us all rushing in and slamming the door shut behind us. Not only that, the windows had been boarded up; between that and the dirt piled up around the outside, the storm of pollen outside had no way in.

Once inside, it took us some minutes to catch our breaths and calm our teary eyes and runny noses. Our handkerchiefs were all soaked by the time we were done, our nostrils and eyes rubbed red.

“Tch, typical. It's too dark to see a thing,” I heard Siegfried say.

“M-Margit, can you get the Bright-Eyes salve from my knapsack? It's in a yellow pack.”

“G-Got it... It's too dark for me to make out colors. Any other identifying features?”

Margit was the only one who could see in the dark, so she brought out the salve that Kaya had prepared for the rest of us. As we applied her salve, our vision returned despite the dark.

As I'd expected, we were a terrible sight. Siegfried's upper lip had been rubbed raw—though it was hard to tell whether that was from the pollen or an allergic reaction to the salve.

“A mix of Bright-Eyes leaves, bilberries, and bergamot. They're all pretty expensive, but I'm really glad I chose to prepare them.”

“W-Wow, this is quite something. It's like someone's turned the lights on.”

I knew of Kaya's concocting talents, but I was astounded as I saw the effects firsthand. Not even the College brainiacs had an easy time whipping up a potion that allowed you to see color in total darkness. This was a full-time pursuit even

for dedicated potion specialists, and it would take a research position's time and resources to actually cook up enough to use. A friend in my old life who was a bit of a military nut had let me try his night vision goggles once; this made them seem like a piece of junk.

“Kaya, when we make it back alive, I want to let you know that you could make a killing selling this stuff. The local guard would probably pawn off their own wives and children for a bottle.”

“R-Really? I, um, well, it takes a lot of mana to make, and you need high-quality ingredients so I'm not sure if I could make quite enough...”

“I'm just kidding, I know you didn't come to Marsheim to start a potion business. But all the same, this is incredible.”

Now we had to think about how to cross the pollen barrier. Each grain of pollen was full of the ichor maze's mana, and it rendered my magic useless—I tried to use Farsight, but it was erased by the literal cloud of mana. This was bad. My whole magic schtick had been based around the idea that I would be able to get around mana blocking by just kind of spamming my spells until something stuck. With this much interference, I wouldn't even be able to use my space-bending magic to send a letter to ask for help.

“We woke up something pretty damn dangerous. With how intense the pollen is out there, it might end up reaching Zeufar.”

Siegfried's voice was shaking again... No, not out of fear! It was the voice of a man filled with a fiery passion to see his responsibility through to the end.

It was just as he said. In the worst-case scenario, the pollen storm might reach other cantons aside from Zeufar too. It was bad enough as it was, but it could cause some serious harm to anyone who suffered from hay fever or other breathing issues.

We needed to do something. But that was predicated on our ability to even reach the maze. We were stuck in a hut and pinned down on the mountain...

“Kaya, you brought that other salve, right? The one that stops tears and stuff!”

“Ah, yeah, I did, Dee.”

“Cool, pass it here!”

Kaya handed Siegfried the salve that she had primarily designed against tear gas and began rubbing it on his face.

“Hold it, Sieg! You’re gonna just walk out and try it?!” I said.

“It’s a medicine that stops tears caused by magic, right? Then it should work!”

“Y-Yes, it prevents magic that attacks your eyes, nose, and mouth, but...”

“I’m gonna see if it works! If it does, follow my lead!”

Without leaving a moment to stop him, Siegfried rushed out of the hut. The door had only been open a second, but sneezes erupted all around. However, we weren’t hearing any screaming or coughing from my comrade outside, and he hadn’t come clattering back in either.

“All right! Kaya, you’re a freaking *genius!*”

Instead we heard our friend’s triumphant shout.

“Ha ha, this is incredible. You two are awesome,” I muttered. To think that a potion I had taught Kaya by chance had led to her developing exactly the sort of counterpotion we needed. She’d come through in the clutch and made an unachievable mission seem suddenly doable.

Try Not to Pump My Fist in Joy Challenge (Impossible). Dated memes aside, I couldn’t believe our luck. It was true that I’d sown the seeds to this (albeit by chance), and Kaya’s own capabilities were to thank, but man, what a miracle. Talent, technique, and timing had all come together in a beautiful alchemical moment. It was almost as if the GM had given us the breadcrumbs for the development that was sure to come!

“We can do this thing!”

“Um, Erich? Come look, something’s odd.”

“Yeah?”

I was pulled out of my victory pose by Margit tugging on my sleeve. As she brought me out of my thoughts, I realized that the stress of the whole affair meant that we hadn’t actually looked around this hut we’d happened to find

ourselves in.

“It’s...not a hunter’s hut,” I said, looking around. It was a small hundred-square-foot shack with a row of rotting bed frames. They were bunk beds, clearly chosen to make use of what limited space there was, so I doubted a local hunter would use a place like this for a pit stop. From the trays and stacks of rotting spare bedding, it looked to me like a medical station. I looked closer at the stains on the sheets.

“Blood...” I said.

“Indeed,” Margit replied. “It’s old, but I don’t know how old. But I *can* say for certain that it’s mensch blood.”

“Seriously?” Kaya squeaked.

We didn’t turn up any corpses in the beds, but the state of the room suggested that some kind of foul fate had befallen whoever had been here. The old bedding, which had practically lost all trace of its original color due to age, was stained black with old blood.

“I’d say that at least six people died...no, were killed here,” I said.

“You don’t flinch in the slightest, do you?” Margit said.

I heard Kaya’s voice catch in her throat as she stifled another small scream. Unlike us, she wasn’t yet used to death.

“Hey, guys, come on! We just gotta beat the beast in the labyrinth and we’re all good, right? So let’s get this show on the road! The pollen ain’t lookin’ like it’s letting up!”

We had stepped into something quite nasty. It didn’t matter what the client had intended anymore. We had to roll up our sleeves and solve this thing ourselves. After all, I doubted we would be let off easy if we ran off now. We had made our bed; now it was time to lie in it.

[Tips] It is said that the gods only hand down trials that They think can be overcome, but impossible tasks are all too common.

It was less a cave and more an opening made by a whorl of roots.

Inside, the intricate skein of the tree roots revealed a network of tunnels. As the party entered, an indescribable feeling of smallness assailed them. Root and earth merged into an indistinguishable mess and the tunnel—more a haphazard opening created by this indiscriminate growth—seemed to stretch right into the belly of the earth.

The party encountered trouble before long. Shambling things—almost man-shaped, their bodies woven from hard branches and sinewy taproots—shuffled out of the dark; as Erich engaged the enemy, the shape of their heads dredged up a memory of something called “sugidama” in his old world. Sugidama were balls of cedar leaves that decorated sake breweries in Japan and were used to signal the arrival of a new sake season. Although this practice had fallen out of common usage in modern times, sugidama could still be found decorating older breweries. Erich could never forget the pleasant fragrance that wafted over whenever he walked by one such brewery in the downtown area near his old home.

“They’re tough,” Erich muttered. The creature collapsed the moment Erich lopped its head off. It seemed that these creatures died no differently than the humans they crudely resembled.

“Well yeah, they *are* wood!”

Siegfried stood behind Erich in a defensive formation as he stabbed through another sugidama-thing in one deft spear blow. He swung his weapon round and knocked the creature back with a forceful strike with the butt end.

Thankfully, the horrors broke under the party’s assault with relative ease.

“Phew, more normal than I thought.”

“Normal?! Man, I almost screamed my pants off...”

The pair took a closer look at one of the creatures they had felled. If a poet were with them, he might croon that it was a crooked mirror of the folly of mankind, a manifestation of nature’s anger toward humanity. However, the party felt no such awe. All they felt was malice—rage to purge these interlopers from where the pollen did not reach.

“Hmm,” Erich said. “I’d expect a plant-based monster to be able to regenerate. You know, like in *The Song of the Headless Tree*.”

“Dunno, never heard of that one.”

“It’s the one where the hero Janos explores a giant tree that extends high above the clouds. What’s with that face? Is it really not that famous? You must’ve heard of the two-headed wood drake?”

“I literally said I’d never heard of it!”

Erich was shocked that his ally didn’t know one of his favorite sagas, but even Siegfried knew where Erich was coming from about expecting them to regenerate. Even among plantlike humanfolk, there was no such thing as a truly permanent loss of limb, though the process of recovery took a long time by mensch standards. A cycle of decay and rebirth kept dryads alive as long as their host tree remained safe.

It was an easy assumption for Erich to make that as long as these creatures weren’t utterly pulverized, they would most likely rise again. He had seen something similar fighting the undead in the ichor maze created by the Craving Blade—tireless foes that would return to assault you eternally unless you reduced them to a head and torso. Compared to them, these plant creatures were positively easy to defeat. All it took was a powerful strike to their heavily telegraphed leafy weak point.

“You’re really missing out, Sieg. It’s a tale full of bravery and wit. We should ask a poet next time to—”

“Hey, Erich?”

From behind, Erich heard the sound of an arrow whistling through the air and then the thud of it hitting its mark. Margit carefully nocked another arrow in her short bow and let off another shot just in case the felled creature would suddenly attack again. Even if they *appeared* dead, Margit wanted to make sure they were well and truly finished off. In this case, a surprising sight had triggered her hunter’s instincts...

“Blood,” Erich said after seeing what Margit had.

“Yes, it doesn’t appear to be sap.”

Margit tapped on the arrow a few times; once she had confirmed the kill, she started to pull out the tangle of leaves from the creature's head. A disgusting splattering sound came with one of the handfuls. Amid a tangle of leaves was an eye.

"Ha ha, so *that's* the secret, eh?"

As Kaya clapped her hands to her mouth, Erich surveyed the insides of the ichor maze once more. It was just like the one he had been through—a labyrinth that grew more intricate and powerful as it incorporated unfortunate souls who happened to wander nearby. It was evident why the enemies took on a human form—they were reanimated corpses.

"Yeah, it makes sense that the animals would steer clear."

A rustling sound echoed through the chamber. Down the path deeper into the ichor maze, a whole host of monsters loomed in the darkness. Some dashed on all fours while others flew in the air. The ichor maze made no distinction between its prey; even the woodland creatures that had met their fate in the forest were not exempt.

"What a welcome."

"This ain't the time for jokes!"

The four adventurers moved into battle against this horde of foes. Margit leaped into the air and loosed a shot, claiming first blood. A messy bundle of foliage crashed out of the air, its wing pierced. With no time or need to confirm the kill, one more arrow went whistling into another flying beast.

"They have the same weak points as their living counterparts! Don't hesitate!"

"Nice!"

Goldilocks lunged forward as his partner slipped behind him. He met something that had been a boar once midcharge; as soon as he closed the gap, he lopped its head off. His sharp blade and IX: Divine skills rendered the beast's flesh and thick, leafy mane as weak as paper.



“Coming your way, Siegfried!”

An assimilated deer—its antlers now far more grand and deadly than they had originally been—lowered its head and broke into a charge, baying for Erich’s blood. However, a simple Shield Bash sent it flying toward Siegfried. It was a fluid move that nullified the enemy’s attack and would provide his ally an easy opening.

“Hey, *think* a little before you pass this crap to me!”

Siegfried knew that most people wouldn’t have been able to react quickly enough. He struck down with his heavy spear with enough force and bloodlust to smash through a helmet, easily piercing the beast’s bark-covered hide.

“I-I’m ready! Watch your feet, everyone!”

Kaya launched an earthen bottle right into the oncoming horde. The throw was not all too graceful, but the only thing that mattered was that the powerful concoction reached its target. The maze’s dense mana patterns disrupted spells before they could finish forming, but Kaya had done all her actual spellcasting ages ago; here, she could simply fire, forget, and let the chaos unfold. The group charging toward Erich fell like dominoes.

The potion was a mixture of sticky aloe juice and western grated yam, ground into a paste and accented with oil to create a slippery substance that would cling to any surface, spread prodigiously, and hold for ages. If you found yourself unlucky enough to fall over in the stuff, even holding on to your weapon would become an impossibility. Only a literal wave of water or Kaya’s anti-slip salve slathered onto your shoes beforehand would restore your footing.

The battle proceeded smoothly, and the adventurers counterattacked with grace after their foes had wasted their precious first round. Unfortunately, Kaya’s concoction limited the harm one could do with an edged weapon, so Erich smacked the foes with his shield to allow Siegfried to pierce them through with his spear. The huntress nocked and fired countless arrows, each hitting their mark, while the mage prepared her next potion in case another unexpected attack came.

All that remained for the party was to go through the motions. Their foes had lost the advantage, and by the time Kaya's potion had worn off (quicker than usual, due to the ichor maze's dampening effects), the only enemies left were worn out and on the brink of death. As the party set to cleaning up the remainder, the gold-haired one murmured, "Strange, this was way easier than I thought it would go."

With the end of the battle, the party found themselves without a scratch, let alone any losses. They'd used only a single potion, and outside the heat of battle the mage could always concoct more from the plentiful stock in her knapsack. Even Margit's arrows could mostly be recovered.

"I had totally envisaged swarms of enemies sprouting out from the walls, or for a different part of their bodies to get infested and attack us."

"You for real? Who the hell could beat a labyrinth like that?"

"The eponymous hero of *The Adventures of Siegfried*, probably."

"Do I *look* like I'm carryin' a magic sword anywhere?! I'm not getting paid *nearly* enough or have anything like the seniority I oughta if I'm doing the kind of work you need Windslaught for!"

Goldilocks agreed—Windslaught was a mystic blade of the highest caliber. The avatar of the God of Metals—emissary of the oldest child of the Sun God, the God of Heat and Sparks—gave an ember from His very body to forge Windslaught, imbuing it with the power to undo any act of tyranny; magic and miracles, as expressions of the caster's absolute will made manifest, shattered at the blade's touch. Such an unparalleled blade was the only answer to the highest class of foe and the deadliest of ichor mazes.

The felling of the Foul Drake Fafnir was an exemplary case of the sword's power. Overwhelming might was to be expected of a drake, but Fafnir was a cut above the rest. Fafnir could soar high into the air at speeds that easily broke the sound barrier, rendering any arrow useless. A foe on foot had no choice but to turn and run against the manifold horrors of its breath. A true dragon like Fafnir could only be taken on with a weapon that turned the very rules of battle on their heads. The idea of taking on such a beast was nonsense in itself, but the fact that Siegfried managed to slay Fafnir all on his own was proof enough that

he had acquired an immense strength that surpassed any mortal being. In Erich's words, it was the perfect weapon for a brooding, solitary type.

Fafnir was a monster that would only appear in the absolute end content of Erich's beloved TRPG supplements. It was true that the party lived on the fringes of the Empire, but it was highly unlikely that a beast from the Age of Gods would still be alive and kicking today, more than ready to slaughter this small crew of relative novices. If such a beast had survived until this mystically dilute modern age, surely the gods in Their heavens would have enacted some machinations of Their own by now.

"Anyway, our foes might be easy to put down, but they're pretty damn annoying. It's a shame you can't cast spells in here."

"Huh? Kaya literally just used her magic, man."

Erich's face twisted into an uncharacteristic expression of surprise. Siegfried had no way of knowing that Erich had just attempted to use his Unseen Hands, only for the spell to strain against the waves of mana in the air, manifesting slowly and feebly.

It would be possible, in theory, to find a backdoor method to bypass the antimana field or batter it apart with a formula of overwhelming power, but Erich didn't have the experience to spare to ratchet up his magical prowess that high. Erich's usual strategy of seeking an easy win by launching off high-level magic without a care had once again come back to bite him.

Lingering memories from a past life came back to him; a friend at the table had mowed down everything in his way with high-level magic, all for the GM to flatly state that they had wandered into an antimagic field. The two of them had argued for hours; Erich kicked himself for not taking this lesson to heart.

"Oh, well, you see, I've got a magic tool that lets me talk to Margit from far away. But I couldn't use it."

"Seriously? Didn't realize you had a cool piece of kit like that. Hmph, the village head back home paid a handful of drachmae for a tool that could light up at night and went parading around the canton with it. Where'd you get it from?"

Erich's luck with the dice must have made a rare concession in his favor, for his thinly veiled lie of "I snatched it off my old boss when I quit," went unquestioned.

All the same, it was an issue. Even if the phase of the moon were different and he could communicate with his alfar allies, they wouldn't have been able to use their power here either. He was stripped of half of his arsenal; it wouldn't be a completely brazen lie for Erich to consider himself a pure and unfettered Fighter right now. He cast his mind back to the credit cards of his old world—this situation was like being turned down from a store that only accepted cash.

Per the Kabbalah: "Heed that shouldst thou affect thyself as a spirit, thou wilt become a spirit." After endless proclamations that he was a Fighter at heart, here Goldilocks found himself finally well and truly taking on the role.

[Tips] Certain spells used by high-level mages and clerics have the power to render a dungeon completely powerless, so many chambers and labyrinths are imbued with the capacity to nullify all forms of magic.

All the same, it is rare to see locations which prevent low-level mages from even casting their spells. Perhaps the GM has some lingering resentment from a previous session.

Ever since I first awoke to magic at the age of twelve, I had become just a wee little bit overly reliant on it.

"Ugh, my scalp's so freaking itchy..."

"Well, yeah, look how long your hair is."

I wanted to stop walking right then and there and frantically scratch at my head. The thing was, I had always taken care of my hair. I cast Clean on it at the drop of a hat, and if I really felt the need for a wash, I would extract water from the air and scrub it clean the old-fashioned way. After all, my magic box of tricks had the simple necessities inside it too, like soap, oil, and pomade. However, we were truly in the trenches right now. We refilled our flasks from tree roots that had absorbed the groundwater. We cooked using roots which smoked horribly, most likely as a preventative measure against precisely this sort of treatment.

Simply put, my life of simple luxuries was put on hold.

I wanted to shout at my past self right now. I had totally imagined that I could pull a little, “Hey guys, just getting something from my knapsack,” while performing a bit of surreptitious space-time magic, and so I had brought only the bare minimum with me on the trip. *How could I be so stupid?* I’d pretended my knapsack was heavier than everyone else’s so I could go through with my ingenious plan, and this is what I had to show for it?!

“Fine, fine, I’ll comb it for you, so calm down, okay?”

“It would be nice to get some more water to wash, but this process takes a long while.”

Margit pulled out a comb and began to untie my hair, and Kaya gave a gentle grin at me while she watched the water collecting in the pan. The two women kindly listened to my moaning, but I could tell that they couldn’t wait until they could go home and have a nice bath too. *No one told me this would be such a long expedition...*

“All right, let’s update the map.”

Although our first battle in this labyrinth had gone rather well, our actual exploration wasn’t going so swimmingly. I wasn’t sure just how many pages of maps the GM had prepared in some kind of feverish creative fugue, but there seemed to be no end to the maze. Compared to this, Mika’s and my trip through the realm of the Craving Blade had a pretty straightforward route, despite the riddles, traps, and endless hordes of the undead.

We were following the old adage that down is good, but we still encountered dead ends or routes where the only way was up. To combat getting completely and utterly lost, we managed to create a three-dimensional map as we went along, but no matter how much we filled in, the maze seemed to go on *forever*. I didn’t know what was going on outside, but if the forest had continued spewing out pollen at the rate it had when we entered, then there might not be anyone left waiting for us. We could only pray that the maze was too focused on us.

“Oy, Erich. You’re missing a line.”

“Ah, thanks, Sieg. ...Hold on just a damn second.”

At the corner of the first page of our map—it had just expanded into a sixth—I had been keeping a tally of the days. It was a rough approximation based on how hungry or sleepy we felt, but after counting them again I noticed something.

“Yeah, what’s up?”

“I think the end of the year has gone and passed us by.”

It had been easily a month or more since we had entered the maze. I didn’t have the luxury of bringing something so fragile as a timepiece into a dungeon, so I expected I was off by a handful of days, but even taking that into consideration, I was pretty certain that the New Year had come and gone.

“No bloody way... Ugh, that means we missed the winter solstice festival! Back home the church of the Night Goddess ran it; their food was always so good...”

“I’m sorry, Dee. I was looking forward to seeing what kind of food the church in Marsheim would offer too...”

“Grah! And all the end of year sweets I missed out on! This royally *sucks!*”

The Trialist Empire utilized a calendar similar to the Gregorian calendar for simplicity’s sake, but nobody really bothered to celebrate the New Year here. I supposed this was due to the polytheistic nature of things—the gods all had specific days over the year set aside for the public to celebrate them. In the countryside the two most celebrated festivals were the spring festival and the harvest festival in fall, both of which the Harvest Goddess presided over. From what I could gather, other regions of the Empire made huge events out of the summer solstice (the Sun God’s domain) and the winter solstice (the Night Goddess’s signature holiday, naturally).

Large churches with a whole legion of devout followers had the leeway to spend weeks preparing, but us common folk simply had one big bash and were done with it. We didn’t have the time to hold a bunch of festivities anyway, and we mostly showed our devotion to the Harvest Goddess through laboring in the fields. Maybe because of this, other holidays felt like a world apart from what I

knew.

“To make up for missing out on all that good, free grub, let’s go nuts with the good booze and sweets when we get home. Then we can fall into comfy beds with full bellies and smiles on our faces. We’ll have earned at least that much!”

“Agreed,” Margit replied. “Though a bath will come before all that.”

It was important to keep morale up with silly talk like this during breaks. When you were right at the end of your tether, right at the brink, pushing out that last drop of energy, that desire to return home and seize what was rightfully yours could give you the push you needed.

Losing your will to fight meant losing your life. We had our rations; the plant-beasts had meat under the roots and leaves; the maze had subsumed edible vegetation within it. The fact that we kept going in these circumstances was proof enough of our will to see this thing through to the end.

Whichever bastard dragged us into this, boy do we have a present just for you... This underlying bloodlust kept us strong. We would win this and treat ourselves silly once we made it home alive.

For an Imperial subject, more than a fortnight without a bath was akin to physical torture. What we’d gone through was cause all on its own to bring whoever was responsible for the maze to court for breaches of our human rights. Jokes aside—this world didn’t have much room for concepts like human rights—we had fair grounds for our anger and frustration. I was sure there was some kind of harrowing, tragic backstory behind this whole miserable dungeon, but my patience had run bone-dry.

Whoever you are that set this ball rolling, I’ll kill you. I will invent a way for you to die if I have to. I’ll bring you back and kill you again, just for good measure.

A grudge? Me? Perish the thought! They’re the one who prepared this godsforsaken long-ass winding dog-water maze with an ambush around every other corner! We were hungry, we were tired, our rations were dwindling, but more than anything we were short on *mercy*.

[Tips] Ichor mazes do not form around nothing.

“Man... I’m getting flashbacks to helping gramps in the woods...”

“Yeah, kinda feels like a gardening job to me.”

After clearing what seemed like the millionth pack of mooks, Siegfried and I couldn’t help but air our grievances. Each foe’s woody outer coating made them tougher than your average mortal enemy, but they still paled in comparison to a well-equipped bandit. Their large numbers also made them vulnerable to Kaya’s potions—a real lifesaver, as we had a total of zero AOE attacks.

What had surprised me was the sheer *number* of humanoid minions. We had peeled back the bark and the leaves from more of our enemies and found people in all sorts of different clothing and armor. Evidently we were not the first to wander in here under similar circumstances.

There were three categories of person-turned-plant.

First were the people with simple clothing, who I presumed had been passersby or who had been ensnared by the ichor maze after it had been unleashed by the landslide.

Second were, like us, people in a mishmash of equipment whose tags immediately told me they had been fellow adventurers. The names and ID numbers on their tags gave no indication of when they had been alive, but the fact that many of their corpses were relatively fresh made me wonder if our mediator had a hand in their fates too. I gave a silent prayer for our fallen fellows.

Finally there were the old corpses wearing matching army equipment. Again these were easy to identify. Their simple gear and weapons differed from the Imperial style; they had round shields and long-handled axes that were rarely seen here. Only armies with a locus of control had matching equipment, and their markedly non-Imperial gear left me betting they’d been some kind of local private army.

It took a potent blend of lingering regret and hate to form an ichor maze. Local strongmen who vied to expand their sphere of dominion against the

Empire would go to any lengths. I couldn't imagine what sort of sordid plot had sown this maze...

“Hey, Erich? What's this?”

“Nicely spotted, Siegfried. Looks like we've finally caught a lucky break.”

Beyond the bend of a tunnel that had been blocked by a squadron of corpses lay a door concealed behind an array of roots.

It was a simple door that most people wouldn't have ever noticed. Just as the Craving Blade's maze expanded by simply copying and pasting adventurers' hideouts, I surmised that the core of any maze created its surroundings based on a place that had some significance to it.

At long last we had found a break in the labyrinth's monomaniacal architectural fixation. If we hoped for answers, then the odds were that they could be found on the other side of that door.

“Margit, would you mind having a look?”

“Opening locks and indoor scouting are both out of my usual scope, but sure.”

All the same, my partner rose to the task and pulled out a listening instrument—a piece of metal that looked like a trumpet bell—and placed it against the door. She had said that lockpicking was out of her ken, but I knew that she had the tools and had been expanding her skill set. I'd personally seen Mister Rotaru, Mister Fidelio's personal scout, giving Margit lessons—the basics on how to pick locks, as well as extra tips on how to go about it surreptitiously. Margit knew I could use my Unseen Hands to open locks, but Mister Rotaru had let her know that there were enchanted locks that would explode if they were opened by magical means. With this in mind, she had set upon the task of mastering the art of the lockpick with gusto.

Maybe it was a self-conscious thing because she was older than me, but Margit hated being watched while she learned or practiced something new. Naturally I had refrained from teasing her—I knew it would be repaid dozens of times in kind—preferring to quietly watch her improve her skills. I trusted her absolutely.

“Oh! It's not locked.”

“Ah.”

“It doesn’t look to be booby-trapped either.”

Among her lockpicking tools was a series of metal sheets which could be used as dowsers to identify if something had been enchanted or not. You placed a number of them by the door, and if one or more reacted even slightly, it was a near certainty that a magical trap lay there.

None of her sheets had reacted; we were in the clear.

“But just as a precaution, can I ask you all to stand back?”

It looked like the tools and skills inherited from Mister Rotaru would get their chance in the spotlight another day. This wasn’t uncommon at the table—false traps like this were a way for the GM to school their PCs in what to look out for in the future.

Margit placed her hand upon the handle and the door opened easily, as if to welcome us in.

“A greenhouse?”

Margit murmured to herself. She had carefully placed her pocket mirror in the crack in the door to make sure that an ambush wasn’t waiting and motioned to us that it was all clear.

It was just as she’d said inside. The glass-paneled room was half buried in the dirt, but it had definitely once been a greenhouse. The plants in the pots lining the shelves had all withered, but a desk and various gardening tools were still in decent enough condition.

“Huh, you had a place like this back home, didn’t you, Kaya?”

“Y-Yeah... The Sixth Generation Head... Oh, one of my ancestors had learned how to build one from a friend at the Imperial College of Magic.”

It wasn’t yet a widespread practice to build temperature-and humidity-controlled rooms to grow plants out of season, but the technology did exist in the Empire. The College’s Major Seven, in a strange moment of friendship—especially considering the persistent bad blood between their cadres—had pooled together their talents in order to realize the preposterous notion of

cultivating the herbs from their hometowns in the forests near Berylin.

Greenhouses let you break the laws of seasonal availability over your knee—I was sure most people in my old world had at least once enjoyed juicy strawberries even in the dead of winter. The desire to eat certain foods all year round was evidently a universal one, and easy enough to achieve if you had the College’s power and resources behind you. Far-fetched ideas were but a handful of experiments away, and the College of today had a giant underground herb garden maintained with artificial lighting.

It was true that magia were bullish, obstinate creatures, but they showed a surprisingly soft side to those they took a shine to. They enjoyed building factions and having a grand old time within them, so it wasn’t a huge jump in logic to assume they would impart knowledge to compatriots outside the College.

“But these aren’t herbs. They look like...shrubs?”

“I think they were seedlings,” Kaya offered. “Although they’re so withered it’s impossible to tell for sure.”

It was a surprise to learn that this greenhouse was for trees, not herbs. It wasn’t all too uncommon to safely grow seedlings in pots and replant them elsewhere once they had grown large enough. But to use a greenhouse? Were they trying to make some kind of magical tree or something?

“We got a book here.”

“As we should. Show it here, Sieg.”

The dusty tome laid out on an abandoned desk *reeked* of a GM’s painstakingly prepared handout, begging for a player to crack it open and read it in halting tones to an increasingly horrified party. I wasn’t the kind of guy to say no, was I?

I had shared the table with a number of battle-hungry players for whom lore took a hard backseat to mechanical crunch. They prided themselves on the efficiency of their kills; second-rate players might be seen by their targets, but first-rate players would get their kill before the victim could even get a word in edgewise. The ethos of these bloodthirsty munchkins boiled down to: what was

the point of learning the backstory of someone you were just gonna kill?

I always preferred to take the deep dive into the lore our GM spent sleepless nights drawing up; part of the fun back then was not knowing what the next roll would bring. So if the GM of this world had given us a diary, then boy was I going to read it. This made it all the more satisfying, you see, when the GM started crying that the god-level boss they spent hours creating, making sure it had zero weaknesses, was felled by OP players who didn't end up with even a scratch. It was their fault for their overconfidence—they're the ones who said, with a cheeky smirk, that we could use *anything* they'd supplied us with.

After checking that there were no magical traps here either, I realized something.

"I can't read this!"

"Seriously, man?"

"Look, it's written in some ancient local dialect. I can get the basics, but nothing that'll actually help."

The diary must have been pretty old, because it wasn't written in Imperial Standard. It wasn't even written in the Orisons—a language you couldn't learn outside of academe anymore. It must have been written in an age when the Trialist Empire of Rhine hadn't yet begun its cultural and linguistic expansion this far west.

"Oh, I can read it," Kaya said as she looked over at the book. "Although the handwriting is *terrible*..."

I was filled with a rush of relief at the boon our newly expanded party had given us. After all, there was a limit to the number of languages even a sage could learn. *Thank goodness*... Nothing stung quite so badly as working up the courage to brave some new dungeon, only to hit a wall because there was no way forward without puzzling out a riddle in a language nobody wanted to spend a proficiency on.

The GM had a responsibility to prepare around a party's niche abilities or lack thereof in advance, but all the same we needed to think of a safety measure if we were going to regions with their own dialects, jurisdictions which favored

cursive writing styles, or even leaving our country entirely...

But, come on... Why do they have to be so damn pricey? The further the distance from my mother tongue, the higher the required experience climbed. I would have to break the bank to even get to a conversational level, but I felt myself breaking out in a cold sweat when I thought of how much it would cost to get good enough to read, say, a foreign grimoire. Yeah, this was best left to the pros.

“It’s a little bit diary and a little bit research log, or thereabouts. This might take a while; I’m already feeling a headache coming on looking at it. Would you mind?”

“Lucky for us there’s some chairs, and it looks like we won’t be attacked in here, so let’s take a break while we’re at it.”

“Aha, this lamp’s still got oil in it,” Siegfried said as he busied himself to help Kaya.

“And there are candles too. This will help save your potions,” Margit added.

“Thank you all,” Kaya replied. “The handwriting is atrocious... I think they didn’t mind as long as they themselves could read it.”

I was totally used to people like that. I remember borrowing my friend’s notes for a class only to open it to find a near-illegible scrawl—the kind where words would only make sense if you squinted and looked at the sentence as a whole.

As Kaya set to work, we cleared away anything flammable and made use of the withered saplings to build a small campfire to brew some tea. Cups of black of tea in hand, we enjoyed the taste of civilization. We’d roughed it for a month like this—one or two days of research made no difference.

While Margit combed my hair to rid me of the infernal itching, Siegfried pulled out a dagger and haphazardly began to hack away at his own. It made for good tinder, so he gathered it together in a small pouch and was done in a matter of minutes. I was pretty jealous as I watched, to be honest. After all, I had two *very* loud friends who would cook up something unthinkable if I dared to cut off more than the absolute bare minimum. They had saved my life countless times by now, but it sure was suffocating to risk a chewing-out for

something as straightforward as trimming my bangs. It got stuffy under a helmet; in all honesty, a short cut like Sieg's seemed perfect.

"Oh yeah... I just remembered something."

"Uh-huh?"

"I was just lookin' at my split ends and it reminded me of something my gramps taught me. It was when I was just a little kid, so I'd pretty much forgotten it."

Ah, is it going to turn out that the advice of a learned elder from his backstory is going to be the rosetta stone to this whole mystery, right on the heels of us learning about that backstory in the first place? We do like our tropes here.

"He was really great. When I said I was gonna be an adventurer, he was the only one in my family who didn't laugh at me. We had a real cold winter when I was twelve and he...was gone."

"Yeah, sounds like he meant a great deal to you. What was it that you remembered?"

"Well, I thought that maybe these trees might be a type of cedar. Remember the mushrooms growing on a bunch?"

"Yeah, I remember."

"Well, gramps told me that cedars work with mushrooms and fungi so that they can become bigger and tougher than other trees. The biggest mushrooms can be found near the roots; they're supposed to be pretty powerful reagents."

Kaya had evidently been listening; she jolted up with a face that screamed *Eureka!* She ignored the chair she had knocked over and furiously read a portion of the diary. In the next moment, she shouted, "*Cedrus sancta!*" as she pointed right at us—or rather, at the saplings which were burning merrily on the campfire.

"*Cedrus sancta* is the binomen of a sacred ancient cedar! The herbalist who worked here was trying to resurrect this long-lost tree!"

Our own herbalist dashed to the fire and fell to her knees as she realized we were using precious specimens to make tea.

The phrase “ancient, sacred cedar” rang a bell somewhere. If I recalled correctly, I read somewhere about a tragedy in a distant country that was tied up in the fate of a cedar forest there. The small nation venerated their forest, and although the cedars made ideal lumber for houses or ships, they engaged in mindful forestry. However, the smaller nation was laid to ruin when a larger nation set their greedy sights on this precious lumber. Their avarice progressed unchecked until the forest was all but razed to the ground, spawning a curse that would haunt the nation—a divine malediction which caused the nation to decay as their martial victories piled higher and higher. Just like Rome after the Punic Wars, this nation collapsed before the Age of Gods even drew to a close, its only legacy being a few dozen small and insignificant nations.

Kaya theorized that the old owner of this greenhouse had wanted to revive this ancient tree that had been driven to near extinction.

“Man,” I said. “We boiled our tea with quite the kindling...”

“We won’t be struck down by some divine power, will we?” Margit asked.

“Nah, I bet we’d totally be fine,” Siegfried offered. “Come on, it was literally ages ago.”

“No, no, no... More importantly...how could we...?! Such valuable specimens...burned away...”

Kaya was absolutely heartbroken at our unintended savagery; we didn’t have any words of comfort to give, as the very perpetrators of the incident. Part of me was thinking that the saplings had already withered away, but even in that state they might have had value to a professional...

Oops is the only word for it... Sorry, Kaya.

After calming down thanks to Siegfried’s encouragement, Kaya told us more about the book and what she had learned.

Apparently, the herbalist had come up with a method to try and revive this *Cedrus sancta* that only existed now in a poor and withered state. Her solution had been to revitalize the withered samples by partnering them with the symbiotic fungi of a local sister species.

It would take a bit more parsing of the diary to identify whether this was a

gods-given task or if the herbalist had taken it on as her own personal project, but the goal was clear: to save an entire species from the brink of extinction and the ravages of empire. She had spent her entire life helping others, and she poured all of those savings into the greenhouse and her new project.

Yet time alone cannot exorcise the spirit of endless consumption. Someone had set their eyes upon the sacred cedars—someone powerful, wealthy, and like the original cedar raiders, hungry to expand and defend their operation. Say, for example, the fellow who'd bankrolled all those dead soldiers.

"I know, if I can obtain the lumber from those legendary trees, then I can build the foundations of an impregnable fortress, just as they did in Marsheim!" was probably the gist of whatever went through his head. Many of the later pages in the herbalist's diary were full of passages airing her grievances that said kingpin's subordinates kept dropping by to ask for the mature cedars.

Within a few pages, her entries became stained with fear.

Selective breeding was an exceedingly difficult task—more a gamble than anything—that would take years, if not decades. This was especially true when trying to restore a species barely hanging on to a genuinely robust state. Even if she sped the process up with magic—directly altering the fungi as opposed to simply implanting them—there was no way she could finish on the timescale the kingpin demanded.

Without the time or the patience, the horrible fool had brought everything to a bloody end. The hut outside had once been a nursing station, and we had seen enough to put two and two together—it didn't take a genius to work out who had done what to whom. That clown, whoever he'd been, had realized all too late that pleading and begging wouldn't make the trees grow any faster. When his patience ran dry, he'd lashed out on what was closest.

But his rampage hadn't ended there. One of the last crimes he committed was to bring an end to the herbalist by his own hand.

The herbalist's despair and anger seeped into the cedars through the fungi she had sought to complete. It wasn't too surprising—the divine cedars themselves had their own will and wanted the herbalist's plan to succeed. However, their last and final hope for their kind had been mercilessly

slaughtered. A cruel irony, then, that the resultant ichor maze bent them into such strong and fecund shapes.

By all that's good and holy... All these damned bigwigs can take a long walk off a short pier for all I care.

I supposed it was a small mercy that this ever-growing maze had been uncovered before it became completely irreparable. It was still a shame how many sacrifices it'd claimed before our arrival. Whatever the case, this room would provide valuable evidence for when we went to complain to our client, so we set about taking what we needed.

[Tips] Magia use all sorts of techniques to conduct selective breeding, so there had been nothing peculiar nor taboo about the herbalist's actions. That the ichor maze formed at all was merely an unlucky confluence of a plant's desperate will to live and the agony of a human dream deferred.

I had to thank Kaya and Siegfried's ingenuity back in the greenhouse, because things progressed far more smoothly and a lot quicker once we had worked out the hints to indicate which way to go. As we headed deeper, the increasingly vicious mob attacks told me that we were headed in the right direction. The maze had upped the ante by finally subjecting us to assimilated bears, giant boars, and soldiers who still retained some faint memory of formation fighting. They were a cut above the prior fare, that was for sure.

Most people who've gone to Tokyo have experienced the despair of trying to find your way from one side of Shinjuku Station to the other. Our adventure up until now had been a task made infinitely more difficult by the lack of any sort of map, compass, or guide. However, the fact that the herbalist had been breeding fungi practically gave us the answer—the core of the maze would be where the fungal growth was densest. Any four-or five-forked crossroads could be breezed through without needing to put down our weapons. The feeling that we were nearing the end of this quest propelled us onward.

Our stamina had long since reached rock bottom. We hadn't had a decent night's sleep in two months. We'd been deprived of any means to clean

ourselves. Our rations had been eaten to their last crumb and nothing we ate could be described as anything more than *sustenance*—I couldn't remember the last time I actually felt full. Our tea bags had been overbrewed to the point that they left us with naught more than slightly brown water.

Our strength was nowhere near sufficient to see us out of here alive. And yet, our blazing desire to return home pushed our bodily limits aside, if only temporarily.

Our thoughts were clear—our bodies obeyed.

It was as we reached a stretch where the ground beneath our feet became more root than dirt and everything was coated in a sprawling network of mycelium that I knew we were close.

“All right gang, one final push.”

The path opened up before us. Where we had been walking single file for a while, all of a sudden we could stand shoulder to shoulder. The air was thick with spores; I would've worried about our lungs getting wrecked if not for Kaya's antidote.

“You all ready for this?”

“Yeah.”

Siegfried drew his spear and packed its sheath into his knapsack. Despite being newly procured, a gauntlet of battles that outclassed any regular training had quickly removed the gleam from the spearhead. His plundered equipment was as tattered as mine—we would need to get them repaired when we got home—but the damage was proof that we had done our job protecting our rear line.

“Let's leave our knapsacks. We want to prioritize freedom of movement.”

The maze was being peculiarly kind to allow us time to prepare when we were right before its core—that, or it had run out of troops to send our way. Whatever the case, it was a favorable situation. We all hydrated and unburdened ourselves of anything that wouldn't help in the battle.

I pulled out *Schutzwolfe*—its blade a little worn from continued use and no

smiths to take care of it—and stood at the front line of the party.

“We move as we agreed. Be ready to think on your feet, okay?”

“If things don’t go as planned *again* you’re buying the first meal back.”

“Sure thing, Sieg. But if things *do* go as I envisioned, then we’re upgrading to the fanciest bath in Marsheim. You’re paying for my massage, and I intend to *splurge*. I have your word, don’t I?”

“Oh yeah? Well, I’m gonna drink your damn wallet dry with the best booze I can get!”

We weren’t talking about sappy crap about how we were happy we were to have met each other—screw that, we were talking about every grubby material indulgence waiting for us back home. What better way to pump ourselves up with enough morale to secure that win?

Siegfried and I crossed our weapons—gently enough not to harm them—in a show of our alliance. After all, it was likely that we wouldn’t have time to talk once we were in the heat of it.

“Let’s show them what we’ve got, shall we? Be careful out there, Kaya; I might not be able to cover for you all the time.”

“Sad to say I’ve used up almost all of my potions, so that goes for you too, Margit. Please take care.”

Only time would tell whether we could win this, but we’d prepared to the best of our abilities. All that was left was to believe in them.

“Let’s do this!”

At my call, we dashed into the room. It was a spacious chamber, probably the same size as a gymnasium. It was circular and sloped down toward the middle—the shape reminded me of a mortar. Right in the center of the recessed space was a giant root and a mass of fungi that seemed to pulse slowly—a gruesome amalgamation of her forcefully aborted experiment. Standing between us and the maze’s beating heart were two plant-bears and a see-through woman.

It was a geist—not quite a wraith, but only barely.

The herbalist’s insatiable need for vengeance galvanized her spirit where her

body had failed, binding her for good to the core of the maze. Her blue, hazy form held the general shape of a person, but the boundary between her and the air was unclear. I couldn't make out any facial features, but I could see two gaping spaces where her eyes would be, out of which trailed a constant stream of ghostly blood. It spoke well enough of how gruesome her death had been.

Just as I expected—one boss, two lackeys!

She noticed our party charging toward her and let out an ear-piercing wail. Her words fell on empty ears. Even if we understood her antiquated tongue, it was impossible to distinguish any words through the distortion of undeath, her grief, and ages of isolation; her voice was like a set of rusted blades scraping edge to edge.

The geist's nightmare would never end so long as she remained bound here. We would deliver her from her suffering.

All right, time for the climax, baby! I haven't forgotten the hell you put us through—it doesn't matter what kind of tragedy you've experienced, this ends here and now! No questions, no sympathy—your ass is busted!

I had sped ahead of my three teammates, but two objects went whistling past me. The first was an arrow loosed by Margit. The second was a bolt fired from a crossbow that Kaya had borrowed from her. It didn't matter that Kaya wasn't as sharp a shot as Margit—the potion that she had affixed to her own missile would do its job even if it didn't hit a bull's-eye.

Margit's arrow thudded into one of the bears and Kaya's bolt shied off its mark, crashing into the floor. That was more than enough. The bottle cracked open in a puff of white haze imbued with a smattering of evil-banishing silver. It was Kaya's very own antimana force field.

This was something that I really, *really* didn't want to admit, but I had filed just a few small shavings from the silver hairpiece Cecilia had given me when I left Berylin and gave them to Kaya in order to create this evil-quelling catalyst. You see, I had a few inklings what kind of boss was waiting for us; I had a hard time believing the herbalist *wouldn't* be hanging around as a geist or a wraith, under the circumstances. A supposition needed a countermeasure—no matter how merciless the decision.

Come on, you didn't expect me of all people to not have a few measures against the undead up my sleeve, did you? During all those harrowing cosplay sessions, every single moment I had time to so much as catch my breath, I racked my brains thinking of how best to destroy the foul vitality glorifier who had ensnared me in her silly games. It should come as no surprise that I had spent hours in the College's library researching how to kill something that was already dead. Sad to say, the quickest measure I had found was to bring her enough joy to allow her to pass on—I tried my best to push down images of me and Mika putting on a little all-singing, all-dancing revue for her, and the dozens of humiliating costume changes it would have to entail. All the same, I had learned a lot about these creatures.

Geists and wraiths were born from an intense, lingering regret tied to this world. All the mana that they would have spent over the remainder of their lives then crystallized in an instant to create their incorporeal form. Not only did regular physical attacks pass right through them, but they were also blessed with magical talents that far surpassed whatever they once had in life. You couldn't underestimate how much power someone might have had under the hood waiting for undeath to catalyze it; I recalled the case of a noble's daughter with no reputation for any aptitude with magic who, after her assassination, managed to channel the lingering grief around her passing into a rampage that left her family's entire estate a smoking ruin.

Geists, unlike wraiths, couldn't interact with the physical world, were locked into the emotional state of the moment of their deaths, and steadily "lost fidelity" over time, their mental faculties wearing down to bare nubs. What united the two was that they were damned difficult to kill.

Though they were laughable in comparison to a unique figure like Lady Leizniz, geists were a nightmare for any beginner adventurer. It was a tale as old as time that a newbie party would face one with physical weapons—only magical weapons would even begin to affect them—lose their backliners to a magical assault, and swiftly find themselves reduced to a fine red mist.

Our success hung entirely on our ability to fight *smarter*. The ichor maze's antimana field was potent enough to render even the Craving Blade inaccessible to me. Fortunately, with enough time, resources, and ingenuity, we

could use Kaya's incredible talents to cook up an ideal countermeasure.

The geist's two bears responded to her incomprehensible command and lunged at us, but we had the numbers advantage. It didn't take long to nullify them—a thrusting blow into the first bear's open jaw let Siegfried sever its spine, and I was able to cut down the other in a moment while it was still fazed by Margit's supporting fire.

While I was preoccupied, an attack came from below—a fusillade of sharp tree roots wreathed in ice. I reacted in time to cut some down and deflect the others with my armor.

Good—if this was what the geist was packing, we weren't dealing with the worst-case scenario. Her attacks were ice-cold, but I wouldn't stop in the face of dull magic that my blade could slice right through. It didn't help that the gal couldn't aim worth a damn. Her attacks needed to land a direct blow to do me any harm, so I didn't even need any magical countermeasures—I could just rely on my own reflexes.

Tsk, tsk, tsk, if you want to kill a frontliner tanking for the whole party solo, then you need to burn the whole shop down, or at least throw something at me I can't dodge or block. I was as good as an undead knight myself—resolved to stand in her way despite the incoming blows, all for the sake of keeping my allies unscathed. It was too late in the game for her to stand a chance of killing me.

“I'm sure you're bored of this endless dream by now! This is your wake-up call!”

She had no greater magic in store. Her flailing roots and the subzero chill that enveloped them were the last measures the geist had. All I had to do was buy time. Just a little would do; enough for Siegfried to sneak past the blockade and destroy the core while she was busy with me.

“Gyaaaaah! Screw thiiiiis!”

As I clashed with her haphazard assault, my comrade rushed past my side. As long as I was here, she wouldn't have the leeway to even attempt to stop Siegfried.

I was sure she could feel her body being pushed back by my relentless blows and her soul being drawn to the afterlife as the rules of the world stated.

Remembered, have you? What it was that robbed those last moments of your life? Do you recall now just how scary a sword can be?

Her outstretched fingers weren't pushing me back—they were pushing back her murderer in the moments before her tragic death.

Don't worry—it'll only hurt a little while longer.

“Waaaagh! Something's climbing up my leg!”

“Ignore it! You'll be fine unless it enters your mouth! I think!”

“What do you mean, ‘I think’?!”

From Siegfried's wailing, I assumed he was dealing with the mycelium I'd noticed earlier. It had begun to crawl up his leg and envelop his clothes. At this stage it'd just be bothersome, but even I didn't know what would happen if it touched bare skin.

It was a stage gimmick—one of those “rout the enemy in X turns or it's game over” kind of deals. But we had taken the initiative. This enemy was trying to burn our hit points down in as few rounds as possible, so I doubted this was one of those tactics where she was biding time to unleash her ultimate move.

“All right... It's closing time!”

An arrow went whistling underneath my armpit and beautifully found its target in the forehead of the geist. The arrowhead hadn't been consecrated, nor was she using a magic weapon, yet it struck true. Kaya's antimana concoction had done its job, disrupting the delicate mana dynamics that kept a disembodied spirit intact and immaterial.

Siegfried had just reached his target and Margit's attack had weakened the wall of roots that had formed to protect the fungal core for a second. He slipped through to engage with the maze's heart.

“Ngh... GRAAAAH!”

We were being assaulted by constant point-blank root attacks, but injuries were a necessary trade-off to get close enough to fulfill the mission—as long as

we didn't die.

“Just die, you piece of crap!”

Siegfried viciously fought his way through, hacking away with his spear at the roots that sought to protect the core from him. The moment he saw an opening, he plunged a length of metal into the fungal mess.

This was no mere loose scrap of iron, though—this was a revision of my mystic thermite. Although my own skill rendered me unable to use my tools without all the mana immediately dispersing, our talented herbalist had managed to rework it into a very special form.

Put into TRPG terms, my theory was that this labyrinth reduced the level of usable magic, which meant my cheap, easy approach to spellcraft amounted to bubkes. But in the hands of our mage—let's be real, our *alchemist*—my materials could be reworked into usable magic so long as we had sufficient prep time. Of course, this was topped off by the beautiful boon that even someone who hadn't awoken to magic could use them.

“Yeow, that's hot!”

The catalyst-potion was designed to explode as soon as it hit the fuse; it began to emit an incredible heat and light as soon as Siegfried had placed it. It was a creation that far outshone the jury-rigged thing I had come up with—it was nanothermite of a far higher efficiency than I could have ever imagined. As it reacted, it burned with the heat of multiple suns, absolutely immolating the fungus.

Siegfried, you idiot, I told you to hoof it as soon as you were done!

Siegfried's scream (it seemed like he'd gotten off with only a burn; any longer and he would've lost his hand) was drowned out by a pair of ear-piercing cries. The roots around the core were all writhing in pain, and the geist was quivering as if she had been set ablaze as well.

Yes—just as I planned! She and the core of the maze complete one another!

This was evidently *not* one of those dreadful cases where you had to defeat both the core and the host at the same time—they shared the same health bar. Even if you whaled on only the one, the other would receive damage too, and

for that I was extremely grateful.

I had handed Sieg one more nanothermite, so I prayed that my comrade in arms would burn it all to the ground.

I focused on my own job at hand.

I crossed over the wall of ice and roots that the geist had erected. I stood before her and took in a deep breath. My body was covered in wounds; I focused my entire being. For this moment only, I drove all energy away from my reactions and my minor traits, and poured them all into my major trait—everything was going into my upcoming attack.

I was channeling all of the praise, awe, and goodwill and every ounce of hate that Erich of Konigstuhl had ever earned and Limelit had gathered together. All that experience it had brought me—it was time to see the peak that it had brought me to. Despite cashing it all in, I had only managed to reach II: Novice in a move that could one day fell a god, and I needed to put my absolute entire focus into unleashing it.

Its name was Schism.

Skills like this aren't all too uncommon—ones that dropped your mobility to zero and caused you to forfeit any EVA or DEF all for the sake of one blowout attack. A weaker attack might have done the job, but my heart was still set on that all-purpose ideal state where I could destroy *everything* within my blade's reach. There was no way I was gonna be screwed over in the last moment by an asspull of "I use my magic and miracles to evade everything."

Which is why I couldn't compromise. If I reached peaks higher than this, then I could evade while attacking; no, in theory I could *continue to combo my regular attacks with Schism*, and I wouldn't need my beloved sword *or* my foul mystic blade. A blunt butter knife would do the job.

Focus, Erich. Ignore the pain, the cold—everything unnecessary to this one swing.

I held my sword at my waist, the blade facing behind me. The instant I dropped my guard, frost rained all over me and roots struck into my flesh—but everything was incidental. My comrade had managed to thrust the catalyst into

the jaws of death despite the relentless pressure and his burning hands.

I could never show my face to him again if I screwed up here.

“YAAAAAAGH!”

As I let out the mightiest war cry I could wring from my body and slashed with my blade, I felt no resistance whatsoever.

Not because I missed.

This was one of only a few times in my life where the strike landed exactly as I had wanted, where I felt the shiver of joy from a hit that had struck true—a critical hit.

An impossible sight lay before me: the geist’s head soared through the air, clad in a ghastly aura.

Kaya’s initial potion had merely been insurance. If I hadn’t found a chance to bust out Schism, then the potion’s effects would have let me knock her clear into the afterlife with just Schutzwolfe. Hell, it had shut down any hope of her resorting to more deadly measures or striking at any of my party members directly.

But man, ain’t it nice when the dice fall perfectly in your favor right in the clutch.

“Ah... Gyaaaagh!”

As the geist faded from existence, her face—previously hazy and indistinct—became clear for a fleeting moment. It was the face of a gaunt, middle-aged woman, and it vanished on the wave of heat that rolled out from the second explosion off in Siegfried’s direction.



It wasn't the most peaceful of send-offs, but I hoped the freedom from her nightmare was justice enough. As the dream burned to ashes, the lingering vestiges of its resentful victims—unfortunate souls, casualties of political subterfuge, who wouldn't line any page in history—disappeared.

The sensation of the ichor maze warping was a strange one indeed. Old memories of clearing that foul labyrinth with Mika raced through my brain—that same sensation of the world crushing in on itself as the maze had lost all power to uphold its existence.

“Whoa, talk about a squeeze.”

“Ow, ow, OW! Erich! Move your damned leg! You're crushing my balls!”

“D-Dee, your hand! It's—!”

“S-Sorry, Kaya! Wh-Whoa!”

The conclusion to our battle was neither dramatic nor heartfelt.

We found ourselves squashed together in a tree hollow. It was hard to believe that the sweeping maze we had spent weeks in was shrunk down to the size of a rotten old tree.

As I peered over at the mash of bodies, I saw that apparently Siegfried the Lucky had landed in a position worthy of his title; his hand found itself right on Kaya's chest. My own good luck had obviously run dry; I received an elbow to the jaw as Siegfried twisted his body to save Kaya from the awkward situation. I was happy that Margit had managed to avoid the crush, but jeez, the last thing my battered old body needed was one last little taste of blunt force trauma.

“Gods above, Sieg, that's probably the most painful hit I've received all day.”

“Sorry, man... Collateral damage...”

As we pulled ourselves free of the hollow with much moaning and complaining, the sight that awaited us was a lonely scene of a mountain wreathed in dead trees—or, thinking on it now, mere bare branches, all stemming from that one sapling buried in the deep.

It was a small blessing that, despite the last-minute tag-team fight with a demon mushroom, we'd been spared the trouble of burning the whole

mycelium out of the mountain.

Looking around, I saw that along with our party, the equipment we had left in front of the chamber and a number of items were strewn about. I supposed now was as good a time as any to bust out the loot tables.

“Hey, Kaya? Do you mind having a look at that stuff to see if there’s anything of worth? I dunno, like a valuable branch or something...”

“I-Incredible!” Kaya squeaked almost immediately. “You were right—there’s a sacred cedar branch! A-And it’s healthy, right down to the leaves! I can’t even fathom how much this would be worth as a staff! And...look, another research log! This wasn’t in the greenhouse!”

“Now, now; Erich? Siegfried? You’re both covered in injuries. We should patch those up first.”

Margit was right—we were a mess. We had done everything we could as frontliners to take on blow after blow to protect our back line while also fulfilling our respective missions. I was covered in cuts, dampening my clothes in blood. I was alive and nothing was beyond repair, but my next few bath visits were going to *sting*.

I was more concerned about the cleanup that this mountain would need. It was horrendously quiet—it seemed as if even all the insects for miles around were dead too. I wasn’t sure whether to weep that the maze had snuffed out an entire mountain’s ecosystem or to be relieved that it hadn’t swept any further.

I couldn’t see any armies or groups of adventurers approaching or encamped nearby, so it was safe to assume that we had fulfilled the mission in time. Zeufar in the distance seemed okay too, so the pollen storm had probably calmed down before too long. *What a relief...* No one deserved to be harmed—as foolhardy adventurers, it was our whole job to suffer the physical cost of our work on their behalf.

“Phew, right, I’m taking off my armor at least.”

As I fiddled with the straps, something fell out of my waist pouch. A rip had formed during the battle, and as I looked down, I noticed that the acorn from the job the cat lord had given us all that time ago had slipped out.

I had been carrying it around as a charm, as it seemed like it might do something to protect me, but I could only watch as it rolled away and into a hole in the ground—almost as if it was predestined to. Then in the next moment, despite the chill in the air, a sprout popped out of the ground.

“Wait, what? This isn’t some kind of foreshadowing, is it? Oh, man...”

I wanted to stick my middle finger up at the heavens and all the gods who lived on high and scream that I had no clue how to even gauge what had just happened. I clasped my head in both hands as my allies looked on in puzzlement.

Whatever the case, we had survived, and it looked like this mountain would find new life in the not too distant future as well.

And so we began the long journey back home.

[Tips] Nothing is set in stone. Sometimes an event just happens to an adventurer by pure chance. However, there is no erasing the possibility that it might be something set in motion by the GM’s pure whimsy after perusing various character sheets...

Ending

Ending

Looking at one's character sheet is a fun pursuit in and of itself, but hearing a story retold brings its own pleasures. There are even GMs who put their own spin on your story through the mouthpiece of an NPC or two.

The joy of winter giving way to spring is universal.

Perhaps this year the Harvest Goddess's slumber was short and the Sun God's mood was blissful, for the frost thawed earlier than usual—the temperature was mild and the weather clement.

For children, who had spent months cooped up inside with nothing but pickled food to sate their stomachs, the excitement of being able to play outside was second to none. Adults shook off the cobwebs as they removed their clothes' winter padding and limbered up to return to the fields.

Before work was to begin, however, the spring festival had to be held. Konigstuhl lit up with energy as caravans arrived, and one household in particular received a letter from a certain adventuring member of the family.

“Oho, it's from Erich!”

The new head of the family, Heinz, received the letter and happily opened it before the post from other relatives.

“Gather 'round, everyone—news from Erich!”

“From unka?!”

Almost immediately a ball of energy lunged at his waist—it was his little boy Herman, just on the cusp of his sixth birthday.

Herman *loved* his Uncle Erich and treasured the glowing staff that he had received from him two years ago—even if it had gotten a bit battered. The young boy was sad that periodic letters were the only link to his uncle, but his

admiration burned just as strong as ever. Despite the distance between them, the fire under him didn't have time to go out when there was sure to be another exciting adventure within the letter.

“Hurry up and read it, dada!”

“Yeah, yeah, don't get overexcited now! Let's wait till everyone's here.”

At Heinz's calls, the rest of the family gathered, excited to hear what Erich was up to. Reading the beautiful handwriting upon reams of fine paper, Heinz emulated his little brother's voice as he read it out to everyone.

“Ahem... Greetings, everyone back in Konigstuhl. I suppose work in the fields will have already begun by the time you receive this letter. Or maybe the frosts are just thawing and you are all preparing for the busy year ahead. It's hard to tell when this letter will reach you, so I'm unsure just how to greet you.”

The beginning of the letter seemed formal, but it was simply the boilerplate polite opener for most educated folks' letters. Next came the expected greetings, asking if everyone was well, and then a recapitulation of the various adventures he had experienced, written in the humblest tone he could manage.

In the two years since Erich had come and gone from Konigstuhl, he had sent a number of letters. Over the years, some particular episodes that Heinz had read to the family covered Erich's tough time getting caught up with a bandit army while defending a caravan, or when he had spent two months stuck in a cave on a quest. Despite the breadth of escapades the letters encompassed, all the details were rather muted.

This letter detailed the misdeeds of a local strongarm in the countryside and how he and his fellows had come up with a scheme to deal with the ne'er-do-well. With only letters to go on, it was difficult to tell what parts were conveyed truthfully and which had been embellished somewhat. This was partially intentional on Erich's behalf. He had an inkling that a certain surprise might make its way to his hometown one of these days, and had decided to only give his family the barest details.

All the same, these letters were important to his family back in Konigstuhl. It was difficult for farmers to imagine what becoming an adventurer really entailed. It was difficult to visualize fighting off bandits or living in a city where

crime could lurk on every corner, let alone a cave so large you could lose even one month in it.

Herman had gotten in a number of fights with some of the local kids because they deemed his uncle's adventures all fibs. Only Lambert and the other members of the Watch could respond with the knowing smile and nod the tales deserved.

“Unka's amazing!”

“My little brother... Sorry, Erich sure is.”

Although his oldest son was puffing with excitement at hearing the latest news in Erich's life, Heinz's other children—his daughter, second son, and newly arrived third son—were yet too young to understand. As Herman immediately related the letter to them—he had memorized every single one of Erich's adventures thus far—Heinz inwardly smiled at his eldest's amazing memory.

“Erich's left us a bit of money again. The postscript says...use it for diapers for our youngest? Does he want us to make him silk diapers or something?”

“Again? Oh, what a dear he is.”

Enclosed was a signed form approved by the merchants' artisan union. It was a widely accepted token that could be exchanged for money, and as Heinz read the slip he noticed that it contained the absurd amount of three drachmae. This was a year's earnings for a regular, small-time farming family. This wasn't the first time Erich had sent money back home, and every time it seemed to be proof that his stories weren't lies. Each time, Heinz and his family reeled at it.

Erich had been sending money back since his days as an apprentice in the capital, despite apparently not having a salary of his own. The fact that these payments continued meant that he must have been doing well in his new adventuring career.

Filled with awe at his younger brother, Heinz and his wife gratefully accepted the gift. After all, Heinz could practically see what would happen if they tried to send it back—another reply would come back before long where Erich's usually placid tone would be laced with frustration and a slip containing double the previous amount would be enclosed. Heinz had learned this the hard way.

“What sort of jobs would allow him to earn this much?”

“Hmm... Back in the old days, I managed to build this house after felling a general, but I don’t know what the going rates for adventurers are.”

Hanna and Johannes had moved to a smaller building to allow Heinz and his growing family to use the family house’s space. Having come to visit to hear about their son’s recent news, they too were amazed by the sum sent back. Although they had sent Erich off with smiles, it was clear that their son must have been getting into all manner of dangerous situations. They were happy to hear of his successes, but anxiety was a constant in between each letter.

“Although,” Heinz murmured, “at this rate it’s looking like all of our kids are going to have their own clothes for their weddings.”

“It looks like it. I know, I’ll use silk for our little girl.”

As the young couple scratched their heads at this happy but slightly worrying amount, a bell rang in the distance. That bell only rang for two reasons, and the sound wasn’t panicked enough to indicate an inbound threat—no, a *bard* had come to town. It looked like the caravans had brought with them a story for the canton to hear.

“Yay! The poet!”

Herman’s eyes lit up and he dashed over to his grandfather, urging him to take him to hear the story.

“All right then,” Johannes said with a smile. He hoisted his grandson onto his shoulders, his excitement rivaling the young boy’s. Along with Heinz, they set off to leave, and the women merely sighed before reminding them to tip the bard.

“I wonder if there’ll be a new story?” Herman said.

“Probably,” Heinz replied with a smile. “Although I wouldn’t mind hearing ‘Jeremias and the Holy Blade’ again.”

“You really never change, do you,” Johannes laughed. The procession eventually reached the caravans’ various stalls. The poet was tuning his six-stringed lute as they arrived.

“Aw man, looks like we won’t get any ‘Jeremias’ songs today...”

“Sorry, dada.”

“I doubt we’ll hear any epics today either.”

Each poet had their own preferred instrument, but genre also affected the accompaniment. If you listened to enough tales, you could work out what kind of story you were to hear before it had even begun. The lute often accompanied more gentle, pastoral stories which had a lot of heart to them, but also energetic scenes of excitement to rouse the audience. Jeremias’s stories were a bit more sonorous and heroic, so they were hardly ever accompanied by a lute.

One could often tell the extent of a poet’s skill from their tuning. Johannes and his family had a long history of watching poets, so they could easily tell that this one was still relatively new to the game. All the same, they wouldn’t turn down a valuable source of entertainment out here in the countryside. They were dubious that the performance would be up to scratch, but Heinz and Johannes paid an assarius apiece before it began as a show of goodwill. Who knew—if it surprised them, they wouldn’t mind tossing a few more coins into the poet’s hat afterward.

The poet coughed to gather everyone’s attention once a sizable enough crowd had gathered.

“Greetings, one and all. I come to you today with a story that I doubt has graced the ears of any present today—a tale of a new hero!”

This kind of introductory spiel was to be expected; it was another opportunity to gauge a poet’s talent. The same tale in two poets’ hands would inevitably come across differently, regardless of the consistency of the story beats, and this preshow speech helped the audience get a read on their performer’s character.

“Our scene unfolds in the lands in the distant west—a city in the reaches of the Empire called Marsheim. In this melting pot of cultures and people, our story revolves around a young and gallant swordsman.”

The lute rang out with a pleasant tone. This one began with quite a subdued

atmosphere to allow the audience to get to know the hero—it was typical fare for a tale with an unproven protagonist.

“O, see how his long golden hair shakes in the wind! Its resplendent sun-kissed glow, like a crown atop his head! The striking sight of his dazzling golden locks earned this dashing young adventurer his sobriquet—Hark! Engrave his name into your hearts!”

The audience were somewhat nonplussed. Heroes were often identified by the splendor of their weapon, the strength of their armor, or the astonishing sight of their builds—but for a story to focus on a hero’s *hair*? It was usually the heroine of a tale who was praised on their looks instead of their bravery.

“The swordsman’s name...is Erich! Open your ears for a tale of Goldilocks Erich!”

The silent audience erupted in joyful cheers. There were few in the canton who hadn’t heard of Erich—whether that be personally, from seeing his golden crop of hair, or hearing the rumors of his quest for fame and fortune.

“H-Hold on a second—did I bungle my lines?! I haven’t even begun the actual story!”

Shock creased the poet’s face. There were probably only a few people in this world who could keep going after such a surprising turn. He almost dropped his lute in disbelief before someone in the crowd called out, “Calm down, guys! We don’t have proof it’s him, do we?”

“E-Excuse me?” the poet flustered. “What do you mean?”

“Forget it. Sorry Mister Poet, carry on!”

Apologies rippled through the crowd and the poet attempted to regain his composure before returning to his song.

The poet began his tale by illustrating the villain of the tale—the more terrifying the villain, the more satisfying it was when the hero struck them down. The antipode the poet had chosen to single out was a fearsome foe, the cardinal traitor-among-traitors, the Infernal Knight himself.

“Hear the name of Jonas Baltlinden. A slimy, conniving knight was he—a

tyrant, a despot, a foul creature. Once the knight to a baron, his master dismissed Jonas from his station, his misdeeds too grave to bear another day. But what did Jonas do? Leave in the good graces of his master? Nay! He slew the baron and all his family in cold blood! Yet the foul fiend's bloodlust, yet unsated, swallowed up a *hundred* innocents in the space of two nights! What cruelty—what villainy! As a cold sun rose, the Infernal Knight began his personal crusade of tyranny with fifteen loyal knights!"

Jonas's own backstory had a sprinkling of artistic license, but no one in the crowd knew, nor did they mind. Despite the fudged numbers, the poet went on to describe Jonas's rampage through the region, his growing strength, and his murders of local patrols. His tyranny reached a point where he started to demand tribute in women, crops, and coin from the cantons. He and his men didn't balk at assaulting caravans and robbing them of their lives and goods.

Jonas's villainy and impertinence in the face of the Empire brought down an incredible fifty drachmae bounty on his head. Drawn in by the allure of riches, many brave adventurers and mercenaries set forth to take on Jonas; even the margrave had mobilized his own personal army against the man. However, each and every attempt was batted away. One night, the Tyrant's men approached Marsheim and sent the heads of the victims flying over the walls and into the city.

Despite the poet's as of yet unpolished skills, Jonas's unending misdeeds sent a shiver down the spines of everyone in the audience. They all wondered what would happen to them if such a menace approached their own canton. Of course they had the Watch, but they weren't invincible. Murmurs began to circulate; if one Imperial knight could go so bad so quickly, what would become of them if another in their own region did the same?

The poet's story began to approach its turning point. The army of the Infernal Knight waited on the roads and brazenly raised his banner—a show of confidence that he could lay waste to any caravan. As it grew ever more bloodstained, Jonas's infamy rose—but never outstripped his true might. His mighty war hammer crushed an endless parade of foes on the field of battle. Merchants who saw the banner ran and left their goods at the earliest opportunity. After all, they reasoned that being *allowed* the disgrace of running

away was far more preferable to a painful death.

“And so the Infernal Knight thrived in his villainy. Yet, one day brought with it the winds of change. Pray tell—was it the caravans laden with annual tax who were to fall that autumn day? No! That day Baltlinden’s place on the wheel of fortune did turn!”

The caravans had with them a noble warrior who had achieved high renown and two epithets already. He was a gallant nemea who had quashed an incursion from the south. This capable adventurer had revived the morale of the panic-stricken caravan.

“The brave hero charged into battle with a mighty roar! He hoisted high his famed weapon above his head—a grand halberd, forged for a giant’s hand—as he faced the Infernal Knight with a smile. The caravans sat with bated breath as they waited for their hero to save them. But the battle ran short—their weapons clashed only three times! *Crash! Crash! Crash!* With a might that no average mensch could hope to achieve, Jonas smote the poor nemea on the pate and crushed it like a melon half spoiled in the high summer sun.”

Screams rose up from the crowd. A hero’s tale needed a grisly turn or two, but it was still quite something to hear of death in such graphic detail. This story had the power to fire up the crowd despite the poet’s unrefined talents, so the original scribe must have been quite talented.

“The Traitor breathed deep the stench of blood, and a smile broke out across his gore-streaked face. With a cry, he bade his men cut down every last survivor! His men, blood starved, rushed their prey with the joy of wolves upon babes in the wood. Jonas’s front line charged with spears in hand, their armor thick with filth, foul smiles on their lips. ‘O gods!’ the caravan cried, for it was all they could do but wait for death.”

The poet paused here for a moment. Heroic sagas were divided into parts—this was not only to help preserve the performer’s voice, but also to make sure crowds would return to find out what happened next. Leaving his audience on a cliff-hanger was a tried and tested strategy to make sure they came back for more.

This story was in three parts. The first laid the foundations and detailed

Jonas's attack. The second part detailed Goldilocks's assault on Jonas to avenge the nemea. And finally, the third part outlined Goldilocks's other feats and got the audience to be interested in what new adventures might be still to come. The poet had been planning to wrap things up here for the day, but the glares from the audience practically shouted that they would rip him to shreds if he stopped now. The poet's throat was still holding up, so he decided to press on. He had been performing for thirty minutes, so his throat was a little parched, but it was preferable to the daggers being stared at him.

“Though all mortal recourse seemed far away, the gods had not abandoned them. *Whoosh!* A bolt came keening, ripping through the evening air! Just as hope seemed lost, this golden missile tore the infernal tyrant's war banner to ribbons!”

The plaintive strums of the lute transitioned into a quicker, higher-pitched melody to stir up the blood. It was a passage that might cause its player a few blisters, but the poet put it out of his mind as he continued the tale.

“Bear witness! His golden figure atop his obsidian steed! Here stood Marsheim's hero, the bolt-slinger, the flag-breaker—his name: Erich of Konigstuhl!”

The poet's tale was forced to a halt once more, drowned out by the entire crowd's thrilled cheers.

[Tips] Poets break up their stories into parts to maintain their voices and to make sure they get return visitors. However, it isn't rare for a poet to make cuts and adjustments to a story to fit it into one sitting.

What on earth is going on? the poet thought to himself as a cold sweat broke out across his brow.

The poet was a typical member of his ilk—having joined a traveling caravan, he spent the days doing odd chores to earn his keep so that he could perform in the cantons that they stopped at. He had a name, but that meant little if few knew it.

He was a young mensch who, if he was honest with himself, knew too well

that his craft was still a work in progress; as of yet he had few stories he could whip out at the drop of a hat. He dreamed of the day when he could manage a solo performance at a theater booked solid by an audience eager to see him.

The poet just couldn't fathom why a story he had picked up working the western arm of his circuit—added to his repertoire on a whim, just because he liked a few turns of phrase—had garnered *this* much interest.

Now, in a canton whose name he hadn't even bothered to learn, he'd found the rapt crowd he'd fantasized about. Since starting the performance, whispers had been shared and the remaining seats had steadily filled up. Now the stragglers were bustling about trying to get a good standing spot to listen to the tale. He wouldn't be surprised if the whole canton had come down for it. They evidently weren't here just to kill time. Drinks and food were being passed around—some of the more youthful men had slipped some money to the priest for more booze; the atmosphere was turning downright *festive*.

Never in his wildest dreams had the poet imagined that his dream would come so soon and so suddenly. His ideal vision of the future was all his friends and family back home finally realizing he *did* have talent and renting out the local theater just for him. But *this*? This puzzling situation where he felt like a prisoner atop the stage? What could he do to allay his worries and just enjoy the moment?

As soon as he had announced the name of this tale's hero—Erich of Konigstuhl—he'd had to put the whole performance on pause as the crowd cried out for confirmation; *are you pulling my leg?* When the poet announced all he knew about the golden-haired young hero—his azure eyes, simple spread of equipment, and small, wiry stature—cheers erupted that it must be the same Erich. His story stayed on hold a little longer as people scrambled to fetch more chairs. Crowds at shows grew and shrunk like the tide, but his own crowd seemed to be continually on the rise. He hoped the stall owners who had lost valuable customers wouldn't bay for his blood later...

The poet could never have foreseen such an occurrence. This canton wasn't particularly special; it was only now that he realized that he had managed to stumble into this very hero's hometown! For someone who was used to relatively lukewarm receptions out on the road, he hadn't expected to have

found such a fervor so soon. The cantons came and went with such frequency that it was easier to just let the details of them slip through his fingers like water. Of course, he would bring out the more famous tales if he was visiting an area with a known local favorite, but Erich was only a fresh-faced new adventurer.

The sight before him was like a gift from the gods. The village head had slipped a libra into his palm and begged him to perform the tale in full. Of course, he couldn't say no—whether due to excitement at this direct payment or the look in the head's eyes. Still a fledgling to his craft, all he could do was nod like a well-trained bird.

“Now then—I believe we're ready to hear the rest of the tale,” the village head said with a tankard in hand, his voice carrying over the crowd. The poet nodded and picked up his lute with trembling fingers. The village head was sitting in the front row next to a young man who was clearly enjoying the story too. *They're evidently close, but don't look alike at all. Maybe the village head adopted him? ...Oh, forget that now! I've got a job to do!* The poet shook his head and regained his composure. A gig was a gig. He needed to pull out all the stops and impress his crowd. Even if his dream had come about unexpectedly early, that didn't change what needed to be done.

The poet flexed his fingers and repositioned them on his lute. Before he struck up the tune again, he made a silent prayer to the God of Music.

O revered one... Should I perform this song well enough to please You, I merely wish for my name to be spread far and wide...

The gods are as ever a capricious sort and won't save someone merely because they prayed for it. The poet knew full well that this show was but a trial that he had to overcome with his own ability.

“Thank you. Now then, prithee allow me to resume the tale of the young adventurer Goldilocks Erich!”

“All right, finally!”

In truth, the poet himself didn't know that much about Erich or the history of this story. All he knew was that the tale was penned by one of Marsheim's finest poets, entered circulation around a year ago, and had only grown in

popularity. Apparently the incident that the story was based on had happened just over two years ago.

For a society that hadn't yet developed telecommunications infrastructure, this was about the expected time frame for a story from the reaches of the Empire to reach somewhere like Konigstuhl. In Marsheim, the tales of Erich might have already piled up into a proper anthology, but the poet only knew this one episode. After all, he had learned it secondhand from another poet. Inwardly the poet was praying they wouldn't ask him to perform any of Erich's other tales. He pushed these worries down and returned to his show.

As soon as he said the hero's name, the crowd erupted with joyous cries of "There he is!" and "You're the finest poet to reach Konigstuhl!" along with smatterings of applause. It was time for the poet to stop worrying and focus on the joy that came from an engaged audience.

"Young Erich was as high noon to the foul knight's midnight, a slight fellow nigh swallowed in the traitor's doughty, lumbering shadow. However, with his sword drawn and held high, he appealed to the battle-weary folk at hand. He stoked a fire in their hearts with a simple ease. O, listen to his chiming voice! O, see his valiant stature, undeterred by evil! None could dare fault his stout heart!"

"Unka's awesome!" squealed a young boy in the front row, a few seats along from the village head. From his tightly clenched little fists, the poet surmised he was a relative of Goldilocks Erich. The poet was struck again by the serendipity of this whole affair.

"Erich cried out! 'Let not your hearts be broken! Think of your families in your homelands! Leave your despair for your grave! Anyone still with fight in their hearts—to the fray!'"

These lines seemed more fitting to a war epic than a heroic saga, the poet had thought, but it fit the story well—it fit an adventurer who had taken the burden of stepping to the front line and saving those who had lost all will to fight. And so the tale came to the battle—the furious Infernal Knight, red with rage at such a grave insult to his banner, charged forth.

Atop his own mighty steed, the evil Jonas charged toward Erich, crushing the

corpse of the brave nemea in his wake. It was the recommencement of a one-on-one duel.

“A mighty crash—a clangor to shake even the heavens! Erich’s sword swung to meet with the Traitor’s mammoth maul! Harken to Schutzwolfe; hear its howl, witness its mighty bite! A sword of justice that would protect his allies and bring an end to evil!”

At these words a man in his twenties smacked the shoulder of an older man—possibly his father?—sitting next to him. The excitement creasing both of their faces seemed to be more from the name of Erich’s sword than anything else...

“Blow met mighty blow! The two knights traded strikes, neither quick to fold! But Goldilocks was swift as the wind—the dreaded war hammer struck above and then below and sparks flew as Schutzwolfe lithely parried each and every blow. Until—the moment had come! Goldilocks’s blade reached Jonas! A hefty strike—the Infernal Knight’s helmet cracked and spun away! Yet the Reprobate clung on tenaciously—unwilling to be bested!”

The audience were all cheers and whoops, but in truth, the poet didn’t really understand this part. Wouldn’t a small mensch like Erich be crushed under the might that had defeated a nemea? He started to think that this equestrian battle might have been a later addition made to punch up a bit that would have been a bit anticlimactic otherwise...

“But Jonas’s mighty swings were nothing in the face of our young hero! Filled with rage at Jonas’s tenacity, Goldilocks—heed!—flew from his steed, catching Jonas in the ribs with a thunderous kick! *Crash!* The Reprobate tumbled to the cold earth! All he could do was look up at Goldilocks as he deftly returned to his own steed!”

This scene too seemed utterly inhuman, but a poet was a peddler of dreams. If a story said that a young man easily leaped from his stirrups to unhorse a knight clad in plate off his horse in one smooth moment, and the audience was eating it up, what point was there in questioning it?

Despite losing the horseback battle, Jonas refused to yield. His soldiers were fazed momentarily at this impossible sight, but he barked orders at them to once more take up the fight. They regained their composure instantly and set

about to protect their master, standing in Goldilocks's way.

"Seeking to protect their master, the Infernal Knight's bowmen nocked their arrows at Erich. Did he falter? No! Goldilocks was not fazed in the slightest. For the evil arrows were not to reach him—Hark! Goldilocks's brother-in-arms emerged from the shadows in the hills to strike down the horde!"

Goldilocks had formed an alliance with an ally he'd been on the job with. Goldilocks had foreseen Jonas's tenacity in the face of his inevitable defeat and had warned him that the Infernal Knight would never drop his weapon in surrender. The plan had been to achieve a true and incontestable victory.

"Yes, from the trees, atop a steed—the brother of our hero's own beloved horse—was Goldilocks's brother-in-arms: Siegfried the Lucky! However, Siegfried had not answered the call of Goldilocks's pledge alone! Astride the horse was a deadly archer—a chestnut-haired arachne, Margit the Silent!"

More squeals erupted, but this time from a small section of his female audience. Squinting over, the poet could see some girls holding hands as they squealed and a gaudily dressed arachne woman cheering as she hung onto a thin mensch man. *So this "Margit" is also local, then*, the poet quickly realized.

"Siegfried's blade shone, his fellowship with Goldilocks as tough as his courage, and in an instant struck down the foul fiend's foolish followers! Even the cowardly rabble who turned their backs on their evil master were spared no punishment for their years of misdeeds, as the eagle-eyed archer pierced them through with arrows that flew at blinding speed!"

The story was reaching its peak. With Siegfried and Margit laying waste to Jonas's supporters, further aid came from behind the front lines of their fellow bodyguards.

"However, the evil army still outnumbered the troop. As they surged upon a fearful troop of caravan protectors, a single bottle came hurtling over their heads! 'Twas a beacon of courage and a fearsome weapon in its own might—a protective missile launched by the Merciful Sapling Kaya! A fine herbalist and another from Goldilocks's party of stalwart allies, she had concocted a potent and vital potion. *Boom!* A mist sprang from the broken shards; her foes twisted and writhed with fear, their very sight robbed from them! With thud after thud,

the vicious vanguard fell from their steeds, their weapons worming from their grasp!”

The poet had heard that her potion would pulverize the eyes and noses of any caught in its blast radius. It was a terrible attack, more vicious than a sword in many ways. He was a bit confused as to why her epithet made her out to be “merciful,” but his crowd was still all in, so he put this aside as well.

“With his allies leading the charge, Goldilocks called out to his fellows. ‘My friends, gathered and bound by the blade! One last push, and the day shall be done! Now is the time for wild hearts! Now is the time to buy your neighbors and your kinfolk all their restful nights to come—pay for them in blood if you must!’ If you could only have heard the deafening roar as a legion of adventurers shouted in fellowship with Goldilocks; their cries rang out past the horizon! The quake of their footfalls! The gleam of their weapons! The surety that the next dawn would shine down on a world that much the better!”

And so, Goldilocks rekindled the fight in the hearts of the fear-stricken warriors as they turned the tables on the battle. Frightened horses bucked their knights and brave warriors struck them down. Their protestations came too late and fell on deaf ears.

Their formation had been foiled.

However, these were foul bandits, preferring death over surrender. While Goldilocks had been rallying his troops, the Reprobate began his final struggle. It didn’t matter to him how many foolish weaklings there were—all he had to do was crush their new figurehead.

Sensing his disadvantage on horseback, or wishing to keep his beloved steed safe, Goldilocks leaped from his horse and took the battle to the ground.

“Despite the setbacks of battle, the Infernal Knight’s strength remained unchanged! His mighty hammer sent whirlwinds through the air, cracks through the earth, and a deafening cry into the ears of all present! It was a hateful thing, pulverizing any and all that stood in its way!”

A mighty foe must remain strong right until the end—a story isn’t exciting if the underdog is completely unchallenged. In a burst of excitement, the bard plucked a presto melody, his own fingers burning under the strain. He could feel

his nails straining, but he could not dare dampen his audience's excitement now of all times.

What was a nail or two for a cheering crowd and the God of Music?

“It mattered not that the mighty Jonas Baltlinden stood before him once again; Goldilocks had one final trick hidden away! He drew Schutzwolfe, readied his shield, and stood his ground! Not an ounce of fear could be seen in the easy smirk upon his lips! What could a mere blunt instrument do in the face of a brave warrior who did not blanch even in the face of death?!”

To a rank pacifist, the image of this young warrior in light armor swiftly evading each heavy blow by the skin of his teeth would seem truly and utterly absurd. People put on heavy, layered armor and took up mighty weapons as insulation against their fear of death. They prayed to their gods for protection and relied on magical barriers to defend them.

But this young hero had cast all of that aside and ignored everything else in his way, all for the sake of securing the felling blow. His leather armor didn't seem as if it would stop even the weakest sword slash, the slowest arrow, the smallest piece of shrapnel, and yet he charged forward, shielded, it seemed, by his pure confidence.

This was the image of a hero to some, but a madman to others. Only at battle's end could a verdict be drawn.

All right then, now's the moment, the poet thought. He readied himself for the hardest bit of the song.

Amid cheers and jubilation...the music stopped.

And then, after a few beats of silence, a vicious strum announced the peak! What followed next was a deft, dazzling passage that seemed as if it had been penned in challenge to any performer who dared to take it up. And yet, despite its difficulty, this time the poet performed it all without missing a beat. He knew just how uncool it would be to mess up the highlight of the story.

“It was the flash of a blade before a whirlwind! The splitting sound of torn armor! The spitting image of martial valor as a single sword strike lays waste to a storm! And, o, behold! A crimson fountain—the wicked man's wicked hand

lopped from his arm, never to be raised against another again!”

This was the moment that stood as the absolute peak of the tale: where the valiant hero defeats the evil villain. Delighted cheers resounded, drinks flowed, and tankards clashed together as everyone present celebrated!

“Look at his pitiful figure—the Infernal Knight crumbling to the ground in pain! Goldilocks tucked Schutzwolfe’s edge under the villain’s throat and proclaimed to Jonas and the crowd: ‘I will not satisfy you with a swift death! You shall walk the long road to your trial, and pay for your innumerable sins against your countrymen!’ This was his tale—let us proclaim his name! The name of this brave hero who laid waste to the Infernal Knight, terror of the reaches of our fair Empire!”

Usually the poet would cheer Erich’s name before the crowd—a way of solidifying the new hero’s name in the minds of the public—but Konigstuhl needed no prompting. Yes, the poet had never had a performance like this before. At first he had been nervous, performing purely in response to the pressure of the crowd, but now he felt the rush of joy. Even the sting in his fingertips and ruined nails felt satisfying.

The poet let go of that dream of performing at his hometown—it wouldn’t matter if he could continue to please future audiences as he had done today.

But...he was at a bit of a loss. He couldn’t finish up his tale unless they stopped cheering and shouting for Erich. As he vamped the victory riff over and over, he wondered how best to calm the excited audience...

[Tips] Audience participation isn’t usually expected from performances in the Empire.

One Full Henderson

Ver0.7

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 ver0.7

1.0 Hendersons

A derailment significant enough to prevent the party from reaching the intended ending.

The low autumn sun cast long shadows over the incipient battlefield. The two armies sized each other up: on one side a white-clad army of spear-wielding soldiers and on the other a motley crew gathered up into shield walls.

Upon the simple white surcoats of the Imperial side were orange circles, indicating at a single glance that they were under the jurisdiction of Margrave Marsheim. Their gloves, chain mail, and helmets were all simply designed fare, and each bore a four-meter-long spear—their astounding reach announcing that the force didn't imagine a close-quarters battle to be on the table. This formation and weapon choice was favored by Imperial armies—a way of turning a regular footman into a soldier in a short period of time.

However, perhaps this army had *too* many new recruits; the eight-hundred-strong force lacked much cohesion at all. The opposing side stood at the ready in a strategic formation, but the Imperial side's had managed naught more than a semblance of order—the soldiers merely waiting in straight lines. It was the choice of a fighting force without the discipline to form up into fish scales or Vs, let alone squares, and as such denied all its most suitable stratagems.

The stick-straight line quivered, their spears pointed to the heavens seeming like grass in the breeze. Hardly any were suited to skirmish conditions, so here they were, their density and number a stumbling block for the enemy. It had simply not been possible to raise them all into war-ready soldiers.

As for the other side, they were well defended and organized. The tortoise formations moved as slow as their namesake, but none showed any trace of disorder. Spears poked out from the gaps in between their round shields, killing

intent seeping out along with them, as the troops advanced, wholly unshaken.

A countermeasure against long-range attacks had also been implemented. Upon their shields were sigils to ward away arrows and soak up the worst Imperial artillery spells had to offer. The footmen's formation would never falter—honed to the perfection of a true showman.

It wasn't long before they reached the Imperial army. Five formations with one hundred soldiers apiece, the only thing stopping them from shredding through the larger Imperial side was time. It was a simple strategy—divide and conquer.

The Imperial side had prioritized speed when forming their army, but the local powerhouse leading the enemy's side knew that he would never win the numbers game. Thus, he employed this old approach to allow his smaller but better-trained force to cut into and wear down the larger Imperial side.

It hadn't been a difficult task, but it had taken time. He had gradually given military training, under the guise of training against bandits, to the people of his canton so as not to arouse unnecessary attention. Over a season or two, he drilled the basics into them before training up another group. Every few years he would enforce training sessions to reinforce the education he'd given them. In a matter of years, he had amassed his own private army. Other local lords took a page out of his book, and they had brought their armies together to secure a guaranteed victory.

A drum pounded out a rhythm over the crowd to keep the soldiers apace. Between the five formations, knights atop their horses barked cries to maintain order, pounding footsteps threatening to drown out the drum they marched to.

From afar, the Imperial side wondered what sort of training could have produced such finely tuned battle instinct. Each unit was spaced perfectly apart and moved in time, despite the distance between them. Each step wore at the hastily assembled army's morale.

They had been at work but a season prior, tilling the fields and cutting the trees, and war had been the furthest thing from their minds. When they had received the call, they had imagined the enemy force to be nothing more than angry peasants. As they prepared themselves, each thought they would take

the head of an enemy soldier and return home with a big enough bounty to build a new house. Yet, the enemy was far more vicious than they had envisioned—any will to fight was lost in an instant. It was uncertain if they would be able to keep a hold of their weapons when the order to move out was announced.

The drum and fife grew louder and louder until the time to engage the enemy arrived. In this battle, no knights came forward to give one last chance to surrender. No words were to be shared before they fought. The army had abandoned any etiquette from the old days, only wishing for victory.

“Honor before death!” one of the enemy soldiers cried out.

“For honor!” five hundred voices roared out in unison.

This might have been a relatively small battle, without even two thousand troops upon the field, but the local lords were propelled by the need to win. This was their first step toward reclaiming power and independence. First, they would quash Marsheim and receive the support of their neighbors abroad. If things went well, other satellite states would feel encouraged to join their cause, and the flames of revolt would become a blazing wildfire. Their forces would be united, and a fearsome new nation would be born.

For the local strongmen, this was their only route to victory.

The older generation had realized that they couldn't attain independence while they were still young and strong. They sowed the seeds of their hate among the younger generation with fervor and prayed that through local customs and festivities they could keep the flame of their hatred alive. This had culminated in the uprising today and others like it elsewhere in the region.

Fortunately for them, the current Emperor viewed uprisings in distant regions like this without much interest. After all, a local army stood no chance in the face of an immense force like the one that had won the Second Eastern Conquest. Survivors still could be found across the Empire proper—old but powerful warriors who had returned home from the Eastern Passage with their lives and glory. Then there were the two hundred-odd drakes who could be deployed at a moment's notice. The Empire's forces, when amassed all together, numbered over two hundred thousand souls. If the Empire unleashed

its full muster, they could easily suppress any local uprising.

Naturally, the Empire did not. Directing an army of that size to one end would be like a mensch trying to brandish an ogre's blade. Not only that, it would draw the Empire's economy to a standstill. Soldiers who weren't in active service weren't simply retired; they were productive members of society. If they had to drop their labors in order to fight, then the economy would naturally stagnate. Then the situation after the war needed to be considered. What would happen to the fields if thousands of healthy men never returned, unable to spend the next decades tending to the crops? To send all these young men to unnecessary deaths was as foolish as razing a field where the seeds had only just sprouted.

The Trialist Empire of Rhine had a nigh unmatched martial might, but it could only be used sparingly. The greater the force, the greater the consequences.

And so Rhine spent the long years after the last conflict laying the foundation for a great war that would render all of their enemies impotent in one fell swoop. Smaller independent bodies of power in the Empire's outer regions would not take this lying down. They sent their forces into smaller skirmishes to slowly seize the upper hand. Through a multitude of schemes, they had taken hold of this small thread that would lead them to victory. It was almost too fine a thread to grasp, but the winnings at stake in the matter demanded all of one's strength.

Their plan was to usurp Margrave Marsheim. While the margrave was busy with affairs abroad, they would make use of the chaos and reinstate themselves as the region's masters.

The clashes unfolding across the region were too small to ever decorate a picture scroll of the story that would be sure to follow, but they were all essential to making this decisive battle a success.

The gap between the two armies finally closed, and weapons drew first blood. The formation was swallowed up by the encroaching force in an instant as the calm descended into all-out chaos.

In a situation like this, a dense formation was weak. The impromptu army had only been taught how to use their spears to stab at a distant enemy or thrust a foe back—they hadn't been taught how to swing a sword when you were

shoulder to shoulder with both your ally and your target.

The Imperial knights, who were used to winning battles thanks to the numbers game, had started to worry. They were unsure how long their formation would last.

The other side, on the other hand, had all but won in their minds. The knights giving orders at the back of the formation smiled at their imminent victory. All that remained to be done was for the twenty cavalry units stationed in the hills to come charging in from the sides, and absolute chaos would reign. When it was all done with, they'd mop up the stragglers and pick over the dead for loot.

On this early fall evening, these troops who had been taken from their harvest would squeeze out the last drops of life before reaching their end. The stage was set; it was almost time for the show to begin.

Aha, the knights thought, *there comes our backup now*.

Cries came from both sides as the cavalry charged in, ready to finish the battle.

The sound of a horn—in legends and in the present day, the end was announced with fanfare.

Yes, the shadows coming down from the hill *would* end this battle. However, not in the way that the enemy army had envisioned.

Flapping in the breeze was a war flag bearing the profile of a wolf, crushing a die in its jaws. There were twenty-five of them in total, clad in light armor and bearing lances and crossbows.

Heading the group was a slender lad whose face seemed positively gaunt compared to his muscular fellows. He was clad in full-body armor, but he removed his helm, and a raucous cheer came from the Imperial side as they saw that it was *him* in the flesh. His long golden hair, flowing in the breeze; his beautiful face, unfitting for a warrior. The Imperial side's morale was refreshed in an instant while their opponents' crumbled.

"It's the hit squadron!"

"It's the Shield of Marsheim! It's Sir Wolf! Sir Wolf has come to save us!"

The appearance of such a piece at this point in the game transformed the powerhouses' sure win into a dire tragedy. Their troops in the hills never arrived, and in their place was an infamous hero and his unit of elite soldiers. This was the worst possible outcome. Even the most dim-witted soldier there knew what had become of their allies—the blades of the Imperial cavalry up on that hill were already stained with blood. The enemy didn't have time to be astounded by the sight.

The battle unfolded as fate demanded. Tales of this sort were rare even upon picture scrolls or the opera stage.

Responding to the flapping of von Wolf's flag, another horn erupted from the forested hill on the other side. It was the fanfare announcing a second attack.

The powerhouses' side panicked. It was almost as if these untrained Imperial soldiers had been placed as bait for this ambush. The tides of battle had turned in an instant.

Their fangs had sunk too deep. Drawn in by the intoxicating fumes of victory, the local army had broken deep into the Imperial battle lines, certain that this would be as easy as mowing down wheat. None could reposition their shield formation in time. Their fear paralyzed them. Only a few pressed their assault or reformed their shield wall to face their rear; the rest could see the inevitable loss to come and tried to push their way out of the crowd to escape with their lives.

What had once been a nervous line of soldiers had become a wall that blocked off any who dared flee the battle. With the hit squadron coming in from both sides, the panicked soldiers fled in the only direction left to them. By all appearances they'd passed over a forward escape, the last resort of a truly wild fighting force.

"Victory! Victory or slaughter!" the Imperial side roared.

"Victory!" came the reply.

This rallying cry was bestowed upon new knights when they received peerage from Margrave Marsheim. It seemed rather banal, but there were few who knew the bloody truth behind this euphemism: if you stood in battle as a soldier, then you would either seize victory or you would cut down as many

foes as you could before you breathed your last.

“For the Empire!” came another bellow as the forces from the hills arrived. Lances met with spears, glinting in the fading autumn glow.

The knights rushed to force their fleeing subordinates back into battle, barking orders with lances leveled at their necks, but it was too little, too late. As the fleeing soldiers froze, spears pierced these still targets from behind. Where the fray was tight, a single spear could skewer two bodies in one thrust. Those who survived were crushed under trampling hooves, pulverized into a muddy pulp.

Lances heavy with corpses were thrown to the ground and the squadron drew their swords and crossbows, ready to charge at another enemy group.

No one sought glory in collecting heads to bring back as bounty. It didn't matter whether they cut down someone in high-quality armor or cloth rags—in the chaos, what mattered was claiming as much blood as possible. Glory would come later, no matter one's actual performance. *Kill for its own sweet sake, and let the heads fall where they may*—this was the efficient and thorough strategy employed by those who fought under the wolf banner.

With half of the separatists gone, it didn't take long for chaos to turn into utter pandemonium.

Meanwhile, no one had the wherewithal to notice that *there were no troops coming from the other hill*. The horn had sounded, yes, but no one had come.

All the Imperial troops had to do was run—to put their faith in their legs as they avoided spears and incoming fire. With their morale and formation in tatters, the enemy troops weren't troops anymore—they were scattered prey running for their lives.

As he watched the revitalized Rhinian army chase down the enemy, the gold-haired warrior sighed, his helmet still off in a show of his bravery amid the chaos.

“Well, that's that.”

One of the members of the hit squadron approached, wiping blood from his face. “Four injured! None dead!”

The vice-captain had suffered an arrow to the shoulder, but it hadn't reached skin thanks to his armor. This man hadn't suffered a real "injury," and those who had were still capable of fighting atop their horses. It was essentially a clean win.

"We still have energy to spare, so I propose we cut down the remainder while they flee! We could manage another battle just fine."

The hit squadron gathered. Below their helms, their eyes were glittering—wolves begging their leader for more blood. Only an immense strength of spirit that held them in check. There was a common saying in the Empire: "A hunting dog only barks at its master's order."

"Very well. However, the injured should fall back. We've done enough to fire them up; let them secure the victory that they deserve."

The squadron, realizing the truth of his words, refrained from reentering the fray.

Baron Strasbourg—who hadn't even been able to assemble all of his troops for this skirmish—and Sir Venstaden—who had rallied the forces—had been suffering a spate of losses recently. Unless they secured a victory in battle, their subordinates would look down on their lord as an impotent fool.

The way a war is won is just as important as the victory. Cracks would form if you didn't allow some of the glory to go to your allies. This was especially true when the hit squadron was involved. Their leader was allowed greater latitude in his doings than even the lower nobles. Ideally, he would go as and when he pleased to save his allies no matter where they might be, but some grumbled that he tended to wander the land to the beat of his own drum. The rumors irked him; they, like his newest moniker, the Shield of Marsheim, had seemingly sprung up from nowhere.

"Provide support to our allies. Put any abandoned foes out of their misery. I'll accept slightly rough measures if it means saving lives."

"Yes, sir!"

The squadron split into groups of three and four and scattered over the battlefield. The battle was as good as won—their work amounted to nothing

more than splashing water over embers.

“Sir Wolf, what about your protection?”

“Unnecessary. You join them.”

“Understood!”

Such a command would sound ridiculous from anyone else, but the captain’s soldiers readily agreed. It would take more than a regular bodyguard to actually be of any worth to their leader. After all, they wondered if they could so much as scratch him, even pitting their full complement against him all in one go. And so, without a retinue, Erich wandered the ghastly battlefield.

The full name of this Imperial knight was Erich von Wolf.

Erich had been knighted by Margrave Marsheim after foiling various underhanded schemes plotted by the unruly lords of the region. His youthful looks hadn’t changed much in the years since his knighthood, and, true to his origins as an adventurer, Erich had held fast to his independence. People had lost count of the number of times he had swooped onto the battlefield, golden locks trailing behind him, to secure victory. The margrave’s over-eagerness had led to innumerable uprisings from various powerhouses across the region, and as he led his squadron, crossing the region from east to west and back again to valiantly quash them all, eventually the “Shield of Marsheim” title stuck.

All the same, skirmishes still broke out as the region’s grasping landlords nipped at the heels of the powers that be, waiting for the moment when the Empire’s grip would falter. Cantons burned, schemes were ruined—day after day after day, Erich fought without an end in sight.

Making his way to the hilltop where the horn had blared out a while earlier, Erich got off his horse. From the shadows a number of his followers appeared—retainers of Sir Wolf and warriors in a mishmash of equipment. The group numbered fewer than ten, half of whom were adventurers.

“Won, did we?”

“Yeah. Was a bit touch and go, though.”

It was this specialized unit that had cut the five-hundred-strong force’s

morale at the root. It was evident that the battle couldn't be won if they had done things the traditional way on the front lines, and so they had come up with another plan.

It was an ambitious scheme that only Erich could have received permission for. It was as everyone had seen—to crush the cavalry stationed separately and ruin their formation. To top it off, a small number had been given horns to blow in order to trick the army into believing that it was surrounded, outnumbered, and outgunned.

Wars are not fought with swords and spears alone—robbing an army of its will to fight was an utterly viable method. It didn't matter that they couldn't back up the initial shock; it was an attack on their spirit. If the enemy acted in the worst possible way for them, then all greater the victory for the Imperial side.

“Gotta say, I was on the edge of my damn seat. If they kept their cool, then we would've been in hot water.”

The man talking to Erich as he threw down his horn had earned similar fame in the region: Siegfried the Lucky and Hapless. He didn't have a leading role in many songs, but he was a warrior of high renown. Siegfried was still an adventurer and a close friend of the Shield of Marsheim—although many mistook him for a retainer—and they had entered the battlefield together many times.

Yet again, Siegfried had managed to perform a supporting role that those more cowardly or incapable could never stomach, with flying colors. It might have seemed like an easy task on paper, but any fool who knew the heft of a blade in the hand and the panic of the battlefield would know that it was anything but. Depending on how the horn was blown, the enemy might become aggravated. In the worst-case scenario, a brave unit would set out in search of the source of the noise, foiling the plan and dooming its executors.

Siegfried could have easily dealt with fifty or sixty soldiers alone, despite the difficult terrain, but that didn't go for the rest of the unit. His skill allowed him to do the work of five people, but without his wife and her own unique talents, it was unfortunate to say that half of the unit would have been wiped out.

Everyone who worked under Erich knew that, whether in war or adventure, you put your life on the line. Where most mortals would die screaming for their mothers or their lovers, these grim few would leave this world without regret.

All the same, Siegfried was bothered by jobs like this one—jobs where his team’s lives were at risk, but not his own. All the same, he had never been able to get over his habit of agreeing to jobs from one patron in particular: a man whose depths still remained an utter enigma. All he could do was hope that when the dice fell, they would look kindly upon him.

“I left this job to you because I knew you could do it. A hundred of these men will return home with honors.”

Erich took the horn from his friend and handed it over to another member of Siegfried’s unit. Erich pulled out a small box that he kept with him at all times, even in full armor. He lit up his rolled tobacco—an ignoble indulgence, unfit for most titled folk, as anything so practical might make one resemble a commoner for a moment.

“We put down a lot of petty landlords today,” Erich went on. “This conflict has marked a real turning point. Even though the region might be firmly under Imperial rule now, the economy’s going to take a brutal hit. Maybe about half of what it was? Dispelling the corrupt doesn’t always pay off in the way you think.”

“We killed a lot of people today,” Siegfried said with a solemn look on his face. “Most of them don’t know it yet.”

The stench of battle had reached them. Erich doubted he could bear the stink of blood and disembowelment without the arcanelly enriched funk of his cigarettes to drown it all out.

“I’ve zero clue what the Emperor and the margrave are thinking... This region is a buffer zone against our big neighbor to the west. What good’s going to come of all this fighting? You’ve heard about the new glass products coming in, right? I still haven’t even seen them.”

The revolts had continued for far too long. The Empire hadn’t put their back into solving the issue; the revolts had started when Erich was seventeen and had continued for the past five years. Erich had spent almost a quarter of his life cleaning up after the margrave.

Caravans avoided Marsheim now. Traveling merchants, stocked with all sorts of rarities from abroad, no longer trekked up the Mauser to visit. The most recent Emperor was known for his love of domestic affairs, so what possible benefit did he have in mind as this all unfurled?

“Hold on... This whole thing hinged on an ambush, so...”

“All right, enough, Erich.”

Siegfried clasped his hand over his former adventuring buddy in an instant. Whenever Erich aired his bad premonitions, they almost always had a way of turning to reality. Simply being present when they were voiced meant that Siegfried, too, was guaranteed to end up on some ghastly battlefield somewhere to sort out the chaos that had subsequently unfurled.

“I don’t wanna die before my daughter gets married or my son heads into battle for the first time. So quit it with your predictions!”

Erich squirmed until his mouth was finally free. “The twins are going to be three this coming winter, huh? The years really do fly by.”

Erich let out a puff of smoke, weariness evident on his face in the twilight. The man annoyed Siegfried to no end, but there was some melancholic beauty in the scene before him.

“Yeah, they get cuter every day. Bundles of endless energy, I swear. So c’mon man, don’t drag me into any unnecessary wars. This ain’t adventuring anymore.”

“Gotcha. You’re my friend, Sieg. I’d hate to keep you away from home for so long that your kids forget what you look like.”

“Grah, why does it sound so convincing when *you* say it?!”

Siegfried held himself back from leaping in and paying back Erich for his gallows humor with a sound beating, thinking instead of his wife back home. Kaya had turned to full-time herbalist work for a while, but after Nanna’s lethal overdose, she’d taken up running the old Baldur operation. He could almost hear her telling him off for acting like a child.

Kaya had gotten stronger in the years since they had met Erich—even more

so after their children were born. Despite the fact that people in Marsheim and old acquaintances from Illfurth called him Siegfried, she insisted on still calling him Dirk. Even after all his protestations over the years, he could never make her budge.

Siegfried felt guilty for being out on work as his kids only got more rambunctious and difficult to handle.

“If no one steps up to the plate, Marsheim will be in trouble. You can do this, ‘dad.’”

Siegfried could only cluck his tongue in reply. However, it was clear to all that it took capable warriors like him to keep the peace. Kaya had never forbidden him from going, and his fellow adventurers helped out, despite their comments that they didn’t approve of Siegfried getting so tangled up in the war effort.

“Hell, when’s all this fighting gonna end? Wouldn’t it be faster to just bum-rush the manor of the guy in charge and take his head?”

“The person with the most power is a renowned warrior who’s got a lot of influence in the area. He doesn’t stay in one location either. If we took him on now, I guess we’d lose...half of our number?”

“Isn’t that all the more reason to take him out?”

“I see your point, but we’ll lose half of us *and* the remainder will be out of commission for the foreseeable future. The losses aren’t worth a bit of momentary chaos. You haven’t forgotten, have you? Their ‘high king’ is just a figurehead; his only power comes in his role in meetings and the like.”

Another thing that ticked Siegfried off about Erich was that everything he said made logical sense, even the crazy things he was asked to do. Of course it would be possible to rid the region of some of its powerful figures, but even an adventurer like Siegfried understood that losing most of Erich’s trusted people was a cost too heavy to bear.

He and his fellow adventurers’ work was the only reason the region hadn’t fallen into complete anarchy. Erich’s squadron also worked hard suppressing large-scale bandit organizations—nipping the birth of any wannabe Jonas Baltlindens in the bud.

“Come on, Sieg. Imagine what would happen if I made Kaya into a widow? She’d be far scarier than any soldier I’ve ever met, I’ll tell you that much. I don’t want the wives and husbands of my subordinates finding the corpses of their beloveds, bloated with the decay of death.”

“Fair point... If we end up having to hold *your* funeral, then I bet Margit wouldn’t even need a day to land me and Kaya face down in the dirt.”

“You know she wouldn’t wait for the funeral.”

“Who cares when! I don’t want an old friend cutting my throat in the night, period!”

As the pair made these dark jokes amid the cigarette smoke, war cries could be heard in the distance. Most likely Baron Strasbourg’s subordinates had taken the head of the enemy leader. It would do a lot for their reputation.

“All right, I’m not a fan of picking up chaff. Let’s get moving, shall we?”

“Ugh, I’m beat. I’m not trained for horse riding, but I keep going back and forth, back and forth... And all this work isn’t doing squat for our adventuring careers! I’ve been copper-green for the last two years!”

“Okay, okay, I’ll get the margrave to pull some strings with the Association manager. The pay’s good though, right?”

“Yeah, but you can never have enough with two sprouts running about the place. My boy’s getting really into herbs and stuff, and my girl’s found my practice weapons. I’ll have to buy her some gear when she grows up.”

“Runs in the family, huh?”

“Yeah. I ain’t gonna stop her from being a sword fighter just ‘cause she’s a girl.”

“Agreed with you there, bud, but weren’t you the one saying how you wanted your boy to pick up the sword? You were talking about his first battle just a minute ago!”

“Who cares, man? As long as I get to show one of them the ropes. Hopefully they don’t take after me and can master the sword over the spear.”

Despite their adventuring careers being put on hold, the pair were as easy

with each other as ever.



[Tips] The Marsheim revolts are a protracted string of uprisings in the Rhinian periphery. Although the Empire favors striking down their foes in one quick battle to avoid any further skirmishes, due to various missteps and political pressures, the revolts have lasted far longer than intended.

I would hate for the locals here to follow in Oshio Heihachiro's footsteps and have the city be put to flame after a successful rebellion. Neither did I want things to go the way of the Upheaval of Onin with a protracted rebellion that went on for a decade.

Blowing out some smoke as I watched the victorious soldiers, I pondered on what it was the Empire truly wanted.

It was coming up on six years since the incident with the cursed cedar, but it didn't feel like it. I had *royally* screwed up the aftermath of that... I had posited that I shouldn't bother Lady Agrippina with local matters—partially because I was petrified of being any deeper in debt with the (figurative) harpy—and gone straight to the Association manager to complain about the local strongman who'd stirred up all this shit in the first place. That, I figured, was where everything had gone so permanently wrong.

Sometime during that conversation, the Association head must have decided that I'd make a useful pawn. Before I knew it, I was swept up in Marsheim's affairs, gifted a knighthood, and press-ganged into helping out.

Don't get me wrong, I kicked and I squirmed. I always knew that the life of a knight was not for me. Come on—dirt wages on top of constant fees that I had to foot, and a position where I couldn't so much as pick my nose unsupervised? I had no aspirations to be called "Sir Erich" or "von Whatever;" I'd never made the slightest effort to pursue such airy and insubstantial heights.

But I had underestimated those around me—those people who came to me with silver tongues, spinning tales of my secret noble origins.

In all honesty, I thought all this crap was way above my station. Loads of people had probably complained about hooligans like Jonas Baltlinden, so I thought I could just file a complaint, get the government to pull up their breeches, and be done with it. Can you blame me for not figuring otherwise?

My dreams had always been to be an adventurer worthy of the sagas, not a knight in some war epic. I had gotten an inkling that the margrave wouldn't mind bending a dozen-odd rules to make use of me, and I empathized with their difficulties compounded by their manpower problem, but—but! I never said I wanted any part of this!

To top it off, Lady Agrippina really kicked me when I was down. You see, she dragged me all the way back to her office—yep, she didn't even bother to pay *me* the visit—with all the ease of snapping her fingers. She spent the whole time dressing me down, pipe in hand.

“Oh? You refute *my* invitation, but gladly help *Margrave Marsheim*?”

“I'm racking my brains—remind me, *who* was it who told me they didn't want to be a knight?”

“And they're asking *you* to do some solo work for them! Not even a noble, not even someone that far up the adventuring ladder—who better to dirty their hands clearing their mountain of political trash!”

Not a day'd gone by without some barb of hers floating back to the surface of my mind. All I could do was sit there like a fool as I took my licks in silence. Needless to say, I was out of options to bail out; all that remained for me was one long, dark, narrow path forward. In simple terms, I was just one more *dunce* who'd bit off more than he could chew.

Looking back on it now, I should've expected this sort of treachery from a bunch of true blue-blooded nobles; they were practically *bred* to scheme. My time working for a noble so close to the political games in Berylin had blinded me to the low cunning of her equivalents in Marsheim.

I had assumed that Margrave Marsheim was a pushover because he had been appointed to a border holding, but it was obvious to me now that he hadn't been foisted away—he had been *trusted* with the front lines to various foreign lands. There was no way someone like me could have foreseen his plans.

“That's why I told you that if there's a task you're not suited to, you should leave it to someone capable—even if you end up owing them a favor.”

“Your previous teachings are painfully clear to me now.”

“Or did you really not want to put anything on my plate? We both know you’re not the sort of person to do something out of respect for me due to my age. I think you got too big for your boots, my little Erich.”

Lady Agrippina pushed her pipe into my chin, pushing my head away from hers. Her expression was one of utter disbelief—to my own surprise, I noticed that she wasn’t smiling for once. Lady Agrippina only stopped smiling when she was disappointed. Her face might as well have been cut from granite.

In the past, Lady Agrippina had mocked me more times than I could count, a smirk always playing on those lips of hers, but this was the first time I’d truly fallen short of her expectations.

Both Lady Agrippina and I realized that there was no easy way out for me, and so I had followed her advice, proposing the novel idea of a “hit squadron”—an idea that conveniently left me far greater leeway.

It became clear to me that although she liked to watch me writhe and squirm, she’d never wanted to see me *fail*. Call it familiarity, call it a matter of her pride in herself—I don’t think she even knew herself—but at any rate I could tell that her mood had been fouled enough to put her off work for a while.

Lady Agrippina knew the workings of the noble world well enough. She realized eventually that I couldn’t avoid receiving a peerage from the margrave, and so she’d pivoted from mocking me to helping me make the best of my situation.

I presumed that in the time since I had left Berylin, Lady Agrippina had—as count thaumapalatine and as Count Ubiorum—been involved in the various plots around Marsheim. Why else had she pulled strings with the margrave to make my situation more favorable? That was the only plausible reason an idea as patently ridiculous and the hit squadron had gained any traction, despite its infringement on Marsheim’s military chain of command. I was obliged to not slip up again.

But I still didn’t understand what the brass wanted. My orders had been to make sure that the revolts *didn’t* end in the next five years while preserving Marsheim’s hegemony. I needed to make sure that the region, full of weak and untrained soldiers, given how far we were from the battlefield of the Second

Eastern Conquest, didn't fall apart. What was it all *for*?

Something that had stuck with me was that Lady Agrippina hadn't told me to "win." She had simply said, "Don't lose." The warning had been crystal clear: don't try to play the hero and bring an end to the rebellions. Lady Agrippina knew more than anyone that I could achieve it, if I really put my mind to it, and so I was forbidden from letting my short fuse bring a swift end to all the fighting.

Something about the scene today had reminded me of something—something Siegfried had convinced me to keep to myself. Making your own forces seem weak before employing a deadly ambush was one favored by those barbarians in the south—sorry, sorry—by those samurai from Satsuma when they sought to overthrow the shogunate.

To top it off, when I had delivered my status report a little while ago, Lady Agrippina was all smiles. She had said, "The war has done great things for my budget and my overall operational latitude," and had shown me a model of an aeroship. That's not quite right—this was far, far beyond the realm of those plastic model maniacs back in my old world. This was the real thing—she had *shrunk down an aeroship*. She was the chief planner for the Empire's air force to come; what she'd shown me was all but a working prototype, kept away from prying eyes with a bit of ingenious spellcraft.

When I had received my peerage, she had told me that it would take two decades to mass-produce aeroships, but she—demon that she was—had used the war to leverage the government into pouring money and manpower into the scheme. I imagined that test pilots were just finishing their final checks.

It was easy to surmise that despite the two-or three-year development time, the Empire had forked over a massive sum to commission five or six more, to be completed much sooner.

You couldn't brush this off as some spate of megalomania. Lady Agrippina was a bibliophile; she found the greatest joy in stories—there was no way she would show off the fruits of her labor to me out of some desire to show off. I was certain that she hadn't worked her ass off out of some patriotic desire to see the Empire reign supreme. No, she wanted to just get her role over and

done with. Once the behemoth could be mass-produced, she could let the rest of the project handle itself.

There seemed to be no low to which Lady Agrippina would not stoop, no feat of devilry she would not consider, to the end of a net gain in free time. She felt no fear or trepidation to aid a scheme that could kill tens of thousands if it meant she could have her days surrounded by her beloved books in the library back. If it meant that no one underestimated her, even with her position and all its epicurean delights, she would do just enough for it, then happily throw work that anyone could do to her underlings before taking a bow.

That was how that *thing* abided.

I began to think that the Empire's inner circle had actively laid the foundations for the ambush today. They had sown the idea amid the enemy that it was the *perfect* time to take Marsheim and waited until the anti-Imperial loci of power banded together to strike at its heart. Then, when they did, they would make use of us in the peripheries to fend them off. Then, while Marsheim bought time, they would amass their forces and fly in thousands upon thousands of troops in no time flat—seamlessly transitioning from a war of attrition with the least of their forces to a flood of their best, in perfect fighting shape.

With no need to worry about difficult terrain, and the hypothetical capacity to move as many as five hundred troops in one go, if the fastest horse from Marsheim reached the capital and asked for aid, I figured it would only take a month for thousands of troops to reach the front lines.

These forces would be drawn from veterans from the Eastern Conquest, elite warriors who had been trained under them, the previous emperor August IV's beloved dragon knights, the freaks from the College—you name it, they would be ready and waiting.

If this were a game, people would chuck their controller at the wall claiming how unfair it was. Imagine you're out near Marsheim on the anti-Imperial side. You hear that they're not well defended, so you decide it's time to take those blue-blooded fools out of the picture. Then on the opponent's next turn, they summon a literal army—that should have been nice and safe far away in the capital, mind—covering hundreds of tiles in one turn, all ready to battle. If it

were me, I would be mashing the Escape key or Alt+F4 just to get out of there. This development was just as epoch-defining as if you had just witnessed the first train barreling down upon you.

But I was on the side with all the might, so I didn't have to worry about that.

The enemy had no way of knowing about these new advancements unless they were quite literally in the pocket of the Empire's most inner circle. You see, the Empire hadn't made any open displays of aviation since their little diplomatic demonstration some years back now. The fact that rumors were going around that maybe it was an empty display, or that the aership could only fly a short distance at best, was evidence that the Empire's intelligence network was watertight.

It would be beyond anyone's wildest imaginations that these small clashes could bloom into all-out war within a month or two. I didn't want to envision the future... Marsheim and everything around it would drown in blood.

A chorus of heavy *thuds* shook me out of my thoughts. Probably heads, from the way I felt one of them tumble. I looked up—it was a bearded man, his face twisted into a horrid scowl even in death, and one that I knew well. He had been one of the knights in charge of the cavalry units who had prioritized fleeing, and one of the few survivors.

What was his name again? I was sure he'd announced it, but I'd completely forgotten.

"I caught a runner. A cavalry leader is one we don't want to leave untethered now, do we?"

In the light of a few campfires and bonfires, Margit and her scouts returned with a number of the army's VIPs. She and the others had seemingly appeared out of thin air, and the crowd of Baron Strasbourg's soldiers had been stunned speechless. It was no surprise that their blood ran cold at the sudden appearance of these covert elites.

"Welcome back, Margit. Sorry for leaving you with the leftovers."

"You should be; it was hardly a meal. Most cavalry only really have their names going for them. If you stripped them of their horses, I imagine a gang of

peasant kids could take them down.”

I was sure the guards would catch hell from their superiors after this. It was fine—they were our allies, after all—but if a hostile group of this size had sneaked in? We could have lost every drunk fool here in one swift stroke, and Baron Strasbourg with them.

All the same, it was a lot to ask of some regular old guards to even catch a glimpse of Margit von Wolf—my wife, who had joined me on my descent into hell—and her own elite scout team under the light of the moon.

Margit jumped around my neck as I joyfully received her, and my squadron welcomed her four fellows—all dressed in the same black-blue uniform—to the feast. I knew more than anyone that no one in the squadron could find them if they chose to truly hide themselves.

The group shook their heads at Margit’s display of affection as they removed their jackets. Around half of the team were floresiensis, capable and agile warriors. They were only kept from the front line because they’d make too much of a mess. It didn’t pay to write such folk off just because they bore a passing resemblance to those other, more pastoral little guys with hairy feet.

“Now then, my beloved husband, what are you going to reward me with today?”

“Anything you wish.”

Margit was as lovely as ever, her preciousness most at odds with her ferocity in battle, and I meant every word of what I’d said. I took one of her pigtails in my hand as I had since long ago and kissed her on the lips. Excited squeals came from the female soldiers and scouts.

No one expected Margit to placate herself with the role of a knight’s stay-at-home wife, doing stitchwork until her husband returned. To watch over my eighty-nine strong legion—twenty-five of them cavalry, myself included—Margit had formed her own band of hardened killers. Sticking with her was probably one of the few right choices I’d ever made. I doubted there were many in this world who would stick with someone through thick and thin to support them like she had.

Thankfully, I knew that she would have no complaints when, once things had calmed down, I'd inevitably decide to adopt some random person to take on the Wolf name and run off to lands anew. Just as I still didn't like being called "Sir Wolf," I think the position of a knight's wife chafed at her. It would be fun for us to run off, change our names, and start adventuring again somewhere new. It might be a bit rough starting fresh from soot-black as a couple of middle-aged farts, but we'd manage.

I had longed for so many years to become an adventurer, and *this* had to happen so early in my career. *O Sun God, sleepest Thou, even now? Well, I guess it is nighttime...*

"Indeed. If I could pick my reward, then I would like a long vacation."

She didn't say "just the two of us," but I could read it on her raised lips. I would love to acquiesce to her demands right now immediately, but that was a bit beyond my grasp.

I could move as and when I wished, but by the same token, I was obliged to drop everything to move into action when called for. Seeing as I was little more than a phone-a-friend mercenary, it was impossible for me to leave my post for a romantic lakeside getaway.

Man, I wanted time off more than anyone. I wasn't greedy—I realized that half a year off would be a big ask, but I was desperate for someone to give me a month off, just a *month*, so I could hole myself up in a hot spring and soak until the smell of blood went away. I made sure my subordinates took turns taking their leave, but there was only one frontline leader.

"Would a hundred more heads buy us some R and R, I wonder?"

"Who knows. Maybe a thousand wouldn't be enough. The enemy made its move today because they knew the Empire's forces would thin out with harvest time bearing down. If we're unlucky, we'll be seeing frays like these until spring..."

The Empire didn't have the economic power to fund a standing army. Of course, they had a number of mainstay personnel who honed their skills through many conflicts, but these main forces were small and precious. With most of their troops conscripted from regular folk, their numbers swelled and

shrunk with the seasons.

The local strongmen must have had their own difficult reasons for making such a big push now. From time to time I let myself speculate that they needed a couple wins to keep their prospective foreign backers watching the game with one hand on their wallets, so to speak.

Rumor had it that the plundered goods and weapons their supply officers had gathered were looted from burial sites outside the Empire. Clearly somebody with power to sling around had something to gain from stoking the fires of revolt and seeing the Empire suffer.

The Empire was hardly innocent of such boorish methods. There was an abundance of satellite states that the Empire had finessed and then forced into submission to its hegemony. Its logic was the logic of all empires—its every act of charity part of a larger, profitable political calculus. It chose its client states for their value as levers against their larger, less friendly neighbors, and its support never lasted longer than their utility to that end.

Looking at it from that angle, I could hardly blame the local lords for playing their power games and stirring the pot as they had—it was, from their position, the logical response to the hand they'd been dealt.

It was all a question of how long it would take for their patrons' patience to wear thin...

“Our enemies today were pretty serious. Who knows, next time the ones in charge might decide to leave their troops as distractions and make their getaway.”

“My dear, surely it would be better to refrain from such troubling predictions while we're in front of everyone else?”

“‘Troubling’? We'd have an easier time if the enemy didn't make us chase after them for once, no?”

Unfortunately, I mostly received murmurs of discontent from those around me. The only ones who gave an encouraging cheer belonged to my retinue, and they could easily go another round and take to the field on their own if they had to.

Come on, Baron Strasbourg, your people have no fight in them at all. What Empire can stand long if it can't give its people—its foundation—cause enough to die for their homeland?

The fact that I couldn't make idle comments like these even after a victory spoke to the lack of diligence here—the same failure of discipline that had skewed things so badly against this bunch in the first place, despite their numerical advantage. The margrave was in his own spot of trouble if he had this many people under him that needed babysitting—from adventurers, no less. If he had a few more heavy hitters working for him, then that would make a world of difference for me. It pissed me off that Miss Laurentius had decided not to help, complaining that she didn't want to go to battle against a local lord's forces. If her clan had been around to rip up the battlefield from time to time, my life would be so much easier.

“Sorry for always working you so hard, Margit.”

“I thought we promised you wouldn't say that, my dear.”

I took some small relief through our silly conversation; it wouldn't have looked out of place in a samurai drama. I needed to take comfort in the smallest things for my foreseeable future—how else could the Shield of Marsheim keep its gleam under all the grime and gore?

[Tips] Erich von Wolf is an Imperial knight known to many as the Shield of Marsheim. With a force of fewer than one hundred, he travels the region quashing evil and supporting towns and cantons that have fallen on hard times.

The leader of his own hit squadron, Erich occupies a unique position. Others who work under Margrave Marsheim look down upon him for his unchecked liberties, but many soldiers and citizens hold him in high esteem. Despite putting his adventuring career to the side, his name still lines many heroic sagas.

Siegfried looked away from the von Wolf couple, flirting as only they could, and set his empty cup on the ground. He always had a knack for finding himself

in difficult situations—whether by his own design or Erich’s—but the past few years had been particularly dreadful.

It had become a common task for him to stir up trouble among the enemy when the Imperial forces needed help, and he had almost become essential to his allies’ rear guard. Though a subordinate occasionally was injured enough to force their retreat, in all the battles that Siegfried had fought in, not once had he let someone die out there. Poets had borrowed snippets from the man’s life to use in their own stories, so dazzling were his results.

On battlefields awash with the reek of death, Siegfried had often rushed into a mob of enemy soldiers seeking to run down one of his allies. His unending stamina was otherworldly, and some suspected that he must have been taking *something* to keep going.

In ideal circumstances, the hit squadron could take on an army several dozen times their size, but Siegfried knew that Erich wanted nothing less than to be lauded as the hero of a war epic. From his comparable position, Siegfried felt no pity for the other man.

Normally, an adventurer had no business involving themselves with squabbles between nations. The pact had been tested severely in the past few years, but the gods’ ancient pledge still held—heroes would not involve themselves in people’s wars, but instead fight the monsters and blights which plagued the gods’ believers.

In other words, Siegfried’s position was *tenuous*. He was dancing a line between hero and Imperial soldier, and newbie adventurers spoke ill of him behind his back. He’d only avoided censure from the Association manager because Sir Wolf had told her that it wasn’t Siegfried’s fault; his poor luck meant he had just *happened* to be hired on the same bandit-quelling job as Erich, had *happened* to get involved in a battle at the destination, had *happened* to be unable to run away, and had *happened* to be forced into the fray. The excuse barely stood on its own two feet, but the manager had swallowed it nonetheless.

As for his wife Kaya, many thought that she shouldn’t have involved herself so deeply with Erich either. What they didn’t know was that Erich had prostrated

himself in front of her and begged her to do her part for the safety of Marsheim. Siegfried knew most of all that only one's own self had anything approaching a complete grasp of their own situation.

After Nanna had passed without ever fulfilling her life's ambition, the Baldur Clan had fallen apart. Kaya had picked up the pieces and cleaned up shop—transforming it into something far more upright than it had ever been. The members had been reshuffled so that any with ill intent were ousted permanently. In other words, Kaya had her hands full.

In all honesty, Siegfried had done far more than any would expect of him for Erich. Sure, they had enjoyed many thrilling adventures and entrusted each other with their lives, but a more rational man would have washed his hands of the matter completely. Regardless, bowing out wasn't Siegfried's style. He couldn't and didn't allow himself the option. He had a wife and two lovely children, but what about Goldilocks, his friend, who had once thrown himself into each adventure with the devil's own grin? Now he was forced into a war he didn't care about, and the smile no longer reached his eyes. Siegfried couldn't bear to see it.

He felt no pity and he gave no consolation. His role in this was to stand by his comrade's side on the battlefield. The revolts were long, yes, but they wouldn't last forever. One day, he would shed his heavy plate—a source of endless praise and cheer for everyone around him—don his old leathers that had been kept safely away, and return to a life of adventure. Siegfried intended to join him again in a journey into the unknown just *once* more; the dream of that day sent him back into battle again and again.

After all, he knew what agony would come of hearing that *the* Goldilocks had fallen on the field of battle, instead of at a quest's end.

“Tch, stupid emotions...”

“Hey, Boss?”

The booze had gone to his head and his group wasn't needed on watch duty. Siegfried was about to settle down for sleep when one of his subordinates called out to him.

He was a newly promoted amber-orange adventurer whom Siegfried had

taken under his wing. He was an audhumbla blessed with a huge stature, but his own martial code meant that he never relied on it in battle—all in the name of an honorable scrap. He was an odd sort, but Siegfried had learned to trust in that oddness.

“What’s up?”

“I-I couldn’t help but overhear what Sir Wolf was saying... Is it true this is going to last until spring?”

“You ask me, the man’s two-thirds a prophet. I’d prepare for the worst.”

The young man—well, it was hard for a mensch to gauge the age of an audhumbla—had been entrusted into Siegfried’s care from the head of the Heilbronn Familie, who wanted at least his youngest to become an upright adventurer. Like his father, he wasn’t the best-looking guy, but he had his head on straight.

Siegfried viewed himself as a normal guy, but the adventurers who followed him viewed him with puzzled interest. To them, it was a fact of the world that Siegfried the Lucky and Hapless saw the world through a deeply warped lens. If Siegfried had been your run-of-the-mill adventurer, then he would have bailed on this relationship with Erich ages ago. The battles that the hit squadron were called to were at best even affairs, and at worst a borderline slaughter in the making. Any regular person would have looked at these matchups and said, “We’re not mercenaries,” before tendering their resignation.

And yet, here Siegfried was, coolly walking into yet another bloodbath, completely used to the sort of struggles that veteran adventurers quaked at. It was an absurdity that he’d managed to grow used to this life.

“Seriously?! This will last another six months at least?!”

“Enough of that, moaning just because it’s got another turn of the seasons left in it. You’re no babe in the woods! You’re blooded! You’ve lived a bit!”

“I’ve killed, sure, I’ll grant you that. Can’t say for sure if I’ve lived yet. I’ve never slept with a girl before. I don’t have much luck with my looks...”

“Huh? Seriously? You’re amber-orange! I’d have sworn someone would’ve dragged you down to the pleasure quarter by now.”

Siegfried scratched the back of his head awkwardly. He had Kaya, and he'd never really been interested in paying for those kinds of services; he had let some of the other adventurers back in Marsheim show the newbies *that* side of life. Somehow, though, his protégé had slipped through the cracks.

It was a pity he had no chance of getting lucky out on patrol with the hit squadron; Siegfried needed to make sure he made it back to Marsheim alive. That or find a stouthearted widow or kindhearted soul who wouldn't mind how he looked during a supply trip to the next canton over.

"Well, that's a reason not to die then, eh? I once spent a whole winter stuck inside an ichor maze as our supplies gradually ran dry. Compared to that, this war's paradise."

"I wondered when one of Dee's famous bragging sessions would begin."

"Oh, shut it! And call me Siegfried!"

In this regard, even his raised voice could compel nothing but a weary "Yeah, yeah," from his own most trusted subordinate.

Just like Erich, Siegfried was nowhere near where he wanted to be. Sure, he had accrued some small degree of fame and returned to Illfurth. Poems had been written about him, even if they weren't going to be classics. But his homecoming had been a lot more subdued than he had thought. Because the stories detailed the adventures of "Siegfried" and not "Dirk," everyone back home had thought Kaya had dumped him for someone markedly cooler. His reputation had managed to *depreciate* in his absence.

It had taken a while to convince people in Illfurth that yes, he was the Siegfried from the stories, and no, he wasn't a penniless fool whom Kaya had simply taken pity on. All the same, the damage had been done. Whenever he did find the time to go back, it was never to any sort of festive reception—just another round of the usual jibes.

His family had come to him with a few requests, and he had fulfilled them—to give his grandfather a more grand gravestone and to buy the land back from the landlord to give to his good-for-nothing father and brothers—but still they looked down on him. The tipping point had been learning where the money he'd sent home had gone: keeping his family flush with booze on the same land,

with the same rusting horse plow. After that, he saw no point in staying in touch.

Kaya's family treated him the same as ever. It was no real surprise. Not only had he forced their one and only daughter to cover herself in soot, he had led her into the jaws of death over and over. Kaya's mother wouldn't let him call her "mother"; she focused instead on pestering him to hand over one of his kids to take on the family business.

Even though Kaya had mostly given up adventuring, she'd never once gone back to Illfurth.

Siegfried never gave into Kaya's mother's demands. He and Kaya had decided that *no one* was allowed to force their twins into any future they didn't want. The whole reason that Siegfried and Kaya had run away from Illfurth was to escape from the pressures of futures that they had never asked for—it would go against everything they stood for to do the same thing to their own children. Whether his daughter tried to put on his armor or his son went out picking herbs, Siegfried would allow his children to do as they wished. A parent often dies before their children, but Siegfried wanted to go out knowing he'd given them the means to pick their own direction and hold to it until they hit upon a better idea.

Kaya's heir-hungry family meant that he barely went back to Illfurth anymore. It upset him that he hadn't been able to become a gallant adventurer whose stories mothers told their little boys before bed, without even so much as a plaque in the village square.

As the night deepened, both Siegfried and Erich's thoughts were with the dreams that were still so distant.

"Man... I wanna go on an adventure..."

"I bet a story will be written about your performance today!"

"But I don't want that kinda stuff... War epics just ain't my thing..."

It was late, and Siegfried could no longer be bothered to set up his bedding. He spread out on the ground, ignoring the party that was still in full swing, and stared up at the moon.

It had been a long time since he had started out as an adventurer. He was no longer the weedy young kid huddled right next to the bonfire, shivering in an overcoat.

As Siegfried pondered on when the next *real* adventure would be, he slowly closed his eyes and let sleep come.

[Tips] In the distant past, the gods decided that nothing good would come of a legendary hero joining battle and mowing down the enemy line like wheat in the field. Because of this, They created a pact that would forbid adventurers from participating in wars between nations.

However, there were cases where the gods turned a blind eye—situations that slipped past Them, friendly adventurers who got the benefit of the doubt, or those rare and extreme cases where the outcome without an adventurer's hand in things is too dire for even the gods to contemplate. Otherwise, the gods do not permit adventurers to lend their aid in matters of war.



Afterword

First of all, I would like to give a quick word of thanks to my grandmother, whom I still think of when I put things away and take them out as the seasons change. There are still so many things of hers that I can't bring myself to throw away, and every time I pick one up the memories come flooding back.

Next, a word of thanks to my editor, who is ever patient with me despite my flagrant and repeated defiance of my deadline. Thanks to Lansane, who provided beautiful illustrations which surpassed my every expectation, despite how annoying I was during the design phase. Thanks to Uchida Temo, who has given my work a new life in manga form, repackaging it in a beautiful and easier to read format (especially considering how I get constant feedback that my work wears people out).

And finally, thanks to all of my readers, who have somehow stuck with this series to its eighth volume. It is thanks to you all that I have managed to complete volume eight without issue! Well, maybe not (flashbacks to the deadline...), but the book's out, so there's no issue there, right? Status ailments don't carry over to a resurrected unit, after all!

Huh? What's that? Continuing like this might lead to a breakdown of my Bonds? My Bad Author stat will start to get stupidly high and I'll distance those around me?

...Okay, I'll try to be more careful in the future. Truly. After all, what unfurls in the next volume is particularly troublesome, and I'm currently scratching my head trying to work out how best to deal with it.

Whatever the case, I didn't have much room in the last volume, so I had to cut out the Western-style list of acknowledgments, but this time I got a whole seven pages to jabber on as I wish, so I'm going to.

This might be the eighth volume, but it is actually the ninth book. It's been quite the shock to me that a difficult TRPG-obsessed guy like me has managed to keep writing for long. Moreover, this volume's coming out at the same time

as the first volume of the manga. The world is really a strange place.

In a further surprising twist, from the end of 2022 to now in 2023, I've managed to work in a whole damn lot of game sessions!

This series was born from all my mid-lockdown gaming whims—*I wanna get back to the table, I wanna scribble out a ream of character sheets, I wanna be an overpowered munchkin to make my GM hate me.* Thinking back, I'd just got a new job offer when I'd begun work on the web novel, so I'm overwhelmed with emotion that this has been possible again.

To top it off, thanks to a bunch of software, I have been able to enjoy online sessions while using my own pieces and dice. Actually playing TRPGs again has really helped me keep the form fresh in my mind, so thank you modern world for allowing me to continue to both play and get ideas.

Fortunately, the sessions haven't gone so overboard as to replenish my stock of possible Henderson Scale escapades, and I intend to keep them pretty ordered. Don't worry though, that doesn't mean my stock is running dry—not at all.

I also have no plans to get so overcome with joy over being back at the table that I shed this mortal coil, so don't you worry about that. Instead, as I rack up more sessions and my pile of new rulebooks accumulates once again, the text file of ideas on my computer grows in kind.

However, I can't suppress that nagging uncertainty of whether I'm worthy of gracing the same table as my fellow PCs. I was invited due to writerly connections, but if certain people heard who I was playing with, then they might want to kill me and take my primo spot at the table.

Back in the days in our old haunt, I was often third or fifth most important or at other times GM to a bunch of weirdos. Just how long ago was that now? Let's do the math... I graduated from university back in the Heisei period, so that means... Yup, yup, enough of those kinds of thoughts! If I keep mumbling this stuff to myself, the Keeper's going to catch on and throw a bunch of Sanity checks my way! Although, I won't stop anyone else wanting to make their own Sanity check if they realize they've suffered a similar fate.

Anyway, it's a pretty damn big challenge taking the lead at the table. You

need to pull the story along, but if you have too much agency, then you take away the spotlight from other PCs, so I need to put my absolute care into making sure my role or anything I do is carefully thought out. That includes avoiding the other extreme too, where the GM who wrote the campaign says, “Actually, do we *really* need someone in a lead position?”

A first among equals among the players needs to be a walking reference library for the game. They need to have an emotional stake in the other PCs. Most importantly, they need to discuss things and help coordinate the group!

Because I didn’t manage to do that, I ended up giving my PC reams of dialogue and developed supremely complex relationships with the other PCs around the table. A session that was meant to last until one o’clock ended up finishing past three o’clock—yes, I do mean in the morning. It was completely my fault, and it’s going down on my performance review in bright red ink...

It was really lucky that we were doing an online session without fear of missing the last train home. Back in my university days, there would often be someone who’d shut down the session by saying “Sorry, I’ve got class first period, so I’m gonna head to the public bath and then sleep.” Because of that, we actually made a rule to *not* keep our little cave too clean, because it would be too easy for any of us to never leave. Ahh, the old days.

Right then, enough of me, let’s talk about Erich. It’s a bit late in the game, but I started to wonder if he’s really our story’s leading PC. Without spoiling what’s to come and simply looking at past events, I’ve noticed that he can be a really passive guy. Because he’s still far from his ideal adventures, he has a tendency not to throw himself into the spotlight.

I think it’s probably an influence from his TRPG sessions in his previous life. In those, the tavern barkeep would never hesitate to throw a convoluted request to a bunch of adventurers who look like they had some time on their hands. Basically, at the table adventures generally kicked off after you received your handouts—he was probably the sort of player who got a bit stuck without the GM luring him along with a big shiny goal to fulfill.

And so I decided to sprinkle in a character who just can’t *not* jump on the adventure hook, no matter how dubiously it’s baited. With a long-running

campaign, sometimes you feel obliged to shift the focus and let another player drive things forward. After all, there's no rule that says one person gets center stage from start to finish. I think it's really interesting when you have sessions when someone says, "Let's put a hold on our next major quest and sort out this other PC's storyline," and you stray from the beaten path.

Of course, it can get a bit out of hand and result in something even more divergent than what we see in the Henderson Scale stories—I mean, it's happened to me plenty before—so clearly we need some temperance. And so, Siegfried and Kaya—allies to our leading PC who appear for the first time in this volume—help to provide this balance. If this was an actual TRPG session, I'm sure someone would comment that the party was short on support and shout at Kaya or Erich to rethink their builds. However, thanks to them, the group's survival rate has shot up.

With their addition, we've reached a long-awaited four-person party. TRPGs usually stick to parties of three to five, after all—it's finally starting to look like a proper campaign.

I wonder why it took nine whole books for this first party to form. If I were writing a manga, I would've been chewed out by my editor ages ago for dragging my heels getting the main cast lined up in one place.

Now then, with our party all together, what comes next? You guessed it—we have our traditional bandit culling and some hack and slash action! Unfortunately, we can't complete the TRPG trifecta with goblin hunting, as goblins are friends in this world.

It feels a little like the GM got a bit screwy with the deep cut supplements when he got around to developing the quest line and populating the random encounter tables, but I feel this volume encompassed the general adventures of a Level 1 party. Well, the general outline at least!

Once we've finished laying down the foundations, they might save a country or even the world, but this is just the beginning, so my plot ideas only concern this region for now. Their world isn't like the ones you see on Saturday morning TV which face a worldwide threat every week, after all.

I really wanted to have a scene where a song about our protagonists reaches

somewhere far away, so personally this was a fun volume to work on. Endings test a GM's mettle, after all. No matter how delicious a meal might be, if it isn't served up well, even photos can't make it look good. If the ending isn't done well and feels kind of meh, you won't want to come back for repeat sessions.

I tried to come up with an interesting journey that suited our PCs' goals. I thought that everyone would be happy with the kind of sleek story that allowed the PCs to shine—the kind that you see in official ready-to-play adventures—so when I read all the enthusiastic comments on the web novel, I felt satisfied enough as “GM” to strike a quick victory pose.

Originally the next volume *would* follow the web novel with a storyline that some people might criticize as being a bit long, but I just couldn't help but include a certain someone in it.

Yep, it's Nanna, who debuted in volume seven. Lansane's character design was just too good. Ever since she showed up in Erich's list of Enemy Connections, she's held a special place in my heart. The five-hundred-word character sheet I'd written up got bigger and bigger and I just want to include her more in the main story.

It's a real reminder of how much mileage you can get just out of seeing your character illustrated. Once they've got a fixed design you can reference and rotate in your mind, you start to think, *Yeah, I bet they had this kind of past*, and you develop them without helping it.

It makes me think of the “shared world” campaign held on a certain image sharing website called pix-something. On it, writers and artists would work together to create characters, environments, and a whole new world. I keep to myself, so I didn't take part, but working with Lansane helps me to understand how some friends who were really into it felt.

As I blab on, it seems like we've reached the end of my allotted word count. So long as I'm here, though, I should add that they've finally made the special D10 I've been craving for so long. I mean, it's a D10! It's a must-have item alongside a D6. I've got a long history of playing as Explorers and Overeds, so I'm hugely grateful. It's rare to always get such high-quality and well-designed merch, and I know the product design team worked really hard as well, so I

want to give a big thank you to everyone involved.

It looks really good, so I hope that it will lead to future merch too.

On top of that, with the honor of being allowed another volume, it looks like we'll be reaching the tenth book. They say that the third book is the most difficult with light novels, so it is truly down to you readers that I've managed to make it this far. Thanks to you, I can always presume upon you all and ask you not to forget to bring me your record sheets to sign.

I'll do my absolute best so that I can continue writing and create more record sheets to give to you all for me to sign should you so wish, so please look forward to Erich's future adventures.

While a certain virus still lingers in the world, I hope delving into TRPGs can bring a little bit of joy and solace during these times. With that, I'll be closing up this afterword.

Now, if this author has managed to pass a successful Conviction check, I shall be seeing you in the next volume.

[Tips] The author uploads side stories and world-building details to @Schuld3157 on Twitter as “extra replays” and “rulebook fragments.”

Nanna (back in her youth)
/sne



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.

Author

Schuld

Illustrator

Lansane

8

Min-Maxing

My TRPG

Build in

Another
World

Preach the Good Word
of Mr. Henderson



“You could show a little decorum
and not telegraph how badly you want to
shoot the messenger, couldn’t you?”

“It’s a letter from the Baldur Clan.
Delivered personally by some of their higher-ups.”

“Oh my. It seems they esteem you quite highly!”

Erich

Margit

As the huntress
awaited the mage's next words,
she was unaware they would make
her squeal once again.

“And...?”

“The one who taught me
how to smile wasn't Siegfried...
It was Dirk of Illfurth.”

← Kaya →



Standing between us and the maze's beating heart
were two plant-bears and a see-through woman.
It was a geist—not quite a wraith, but only barely.

“I’m sure you’re bored
of this endless dream by now!
This is your wake-up call!”

Siegfried



CHARACTER

Name

Siegfried
or Dirk

Race

Mensch

Position

Front Guard

Specialties

Strength VI Dexterity VI

Skills

- ◆ Longsword Mastery
- ◆ Shortspear Mastery
- ◆ Stout Heart

Traits

- ◆ Extreme Luck
(Lucky and Hapless)
- ◆ Baby Face



CHARACTER

Name

Kaya

Race

Mensch

Position

Rear Guard/Mage

Specialties

Mana Capacity VIII

Skills

- ◆ **Potion Crafting: Concoction**
- ◆ **Potion Crafting: Manifestation**
- ◆ **Mending**

Traits

- ◆ **Concocter's Hands**
- ◆ **Alfish Blood**



Bonus Short Stories

Open-Minded

I wasn't sure why, but I found the image of a gnoll delicately working with an abacus hugely fascinating.

"What're you gawking at?"

"Nothing, nothing. I was just admiring your dexterity."

At first glance, Kevin, with his modest mane and black-spotted brown-gold fur, cut a pretty vicious figure. Like other hyenid gnolls, each of his fingertips ended in a sharp claw—and yet here he was, those same digits lithely running calculations on his decimal abacus. I just couldn't help but think that the incongruity of his fierce demeanor and the way he set about his task—back slightly hunched over in concentration—was kind of cute.

"Well, yeah? I may have got claws, but that doesn't mean I can't write or stitch. An abacus is no problem."

I'd come to the Inky Squid because I had something to ask of Miss Laurentius, but unfortunately she'd been absent. Aside from Kevin and a few other lifers and stragglers, the venue was pretty dead.

"Tch, you mensch—*all* you humanfolk, really—you just love your narrow little ideas about the rest of us. I can do anything I put my mind to, yeah?"

Kevin's paws were covered in a rippling gray coat, pads on each finger, and the aforementioned claws at each fingertip. Each digit was fairly stubby, but true to his word, there was no fault to find in his figuring.

Werewolves were a lot closer, genetically and morphologically speaking, to mensch—although they were *far* bigger—and so seeing them do minute work wasn't so odd to me; it was those big ol' *beans* that gnolls and such had that made the difference. I think my sense of incongruity was further compounded by our first encounter. To think the man I'd found intimidating before, so intent

on seeking out fresh prey for Miss Laurentius, was their *accountant*.

“Come on, some gnolls are knights and some are nobles. A body’s got every reason to know how to write a letter and balance their accounts.”

“It’s exactly as you say.”

Still, even judging a book by its cover just once put you in a frame of mind to make a habit of it; rewiring those perceptual pathways took work and time. That even went for more worldly people like me, who had seen nobles of all sorts of races in the capital.

“Y’know what’s weird though? For all your prejudices, you mensch lot are pretty open-minded in *that* regard.”

“Uh, in what regard?”

As I gave him a quizzical look, Kevin made an extremely vulgar gesture—the hip-thrusting kind that wouldn’t make it onto daytime TV. *Yep, at least this side of him is adventurer-like.*

“I’ve seen my fair share, and mensch *do not hesitate* when they’re down in the pleasure quarters.”

“I don’t think that means mensch are ‘easy.’”

“No, no, I get it. I’m a hyenid gnoll—I get the appeal of a strong woman. But mensch don’t do it for me and methuselah kinda give me the creeps. Demihumans, maybe, but I just can’t get it up for some types, y’know?”

I couldn’t help but wrinkle my nose at his brazen display of his tastes. Didn’t he think this kind of lewd talk was a bit lowbrow for this hour? Especially when I was here on his boss’s summons and neither of us had had a drop to drink.

“And that goes extra for those insectoid folk. I got nothing against them, but you’re a braver man than I, picking an arachne as a *mate*.”

I wanted to fire back, but he wasn’t *wrong*. I had made my own choices thus far, and I didn’t hide them so much that people thought I wasn’t interested in that side of life—whether the reason be some fundamental lack of interest, a deep and abiding cluelessness about Margit’s feelings, or in Kevin’s scintillating terms, trouble with “getting it up.”

I didn't know what it was about Margit, but something about her had gripped my heart and wouldn't let go. I wasn't a vitality glorifier or anything—I'd never felt anything similar upon seeing floresiensis, dvergar, or other jumping spider arachne women—but she had ensnared me.

“But yeah, I'm not saying you need to stick to the same race. I've seen a fair few pretty werewolves in my time.”

I stopped myself from pointing out that I didn't see *that* much difference, lest I receive another rebuke for my prejudices.

At any rate, the term “humanfolk” was simply a category decided by methuselah ages ago which bunched together a whole load of races that could produce viable offspring, so I didn't see too much problem with mensch having a thing for various other races. After all, it was an irrefutable fact that mensch had settled down in a vast range of regions, and I had every obligation to respect our liberty in this regard.

In my own life I'd met a whole ton of mensch who had married someone of another race. Even Mister Fidelio had taken the bubastisian Shymar as his wife, and I understood what that said about him. I didn't see the point in slapping the guy with some niche internet slur for his predilections; it was just a plain and simple fact that us mensch had all sorts of itches that only other fellow thinking species could scratch. Give it a think; even in a world with only mensch—sorry, *Homo sapiens*—there was a startling range of sexual inclinations. In a world where your neighbors could have cat ears or toe beans, I doubted that people's preferences were all too surprising. Stuff like this made *way* more sense than the sort of work I used to see in the internet's sleazier and more deviant corners—people turning into boxes, women with boobs bigger than their bodies, people whose personalities or memories had been excreted from themselves...

Ah, but I suppose the demihumans of this world go a little bit further than simply being mensch with animal ears on their heads. After all, Kevin has a literal snout, and Miss Laurentius is a giantess. You know, maybe we mensch are weird? ...No, stop those thoughts, Erich.

I stifled my runaway inner monologue before it led me somewhere that'd

demand a Sanity check, then said goodbye to Kevin and made a mental note to return to the Inky Squid a bit later.

[Tips] Although they may look similar, mensch and *Homo sapiens* are completely different species.

Heaven and Hell in One's Head

It went without saying that each school in the College brought its own unique professorial style, but there were certain standardized lessons in the core curricula.

The School of Daybreak, twisted by their values of reason and efficiency, were skilled in practicing magic that affected base reality. Naturally, they were aware that magic could twist the fundamental laws of the world.

All the same, it was accepted among them that a deep knowledge of the body would lead to a deeper understanding of the workings of magic, and so their students were expected to attend the dissection of animals, or even people, at least once. They weren't as intense as the School of Setting Sun, whose motto was "glory lies buried in the depths of the unrevealed," but there were still one or two mandatory lessons dedicated to the subject—to learn about living organisms' fundamental makeup and what made them tick. After all, an in-depth knowledge allowed you not only to *fix* things but also to *break* them.

Nanna Baldur Snorrison breathed out a puff of smoke as she cast her mind back to the past. These idle reflections were thanks to the unexpected encounter with that miniature portrait. That, or her potent downer wasn't hitting right.

Originally, Nanna had only wanted to create a cure for hereditary color blindness.

It had been a proof of concept, the first step in Nanna's dream to magically reproduce the blessings of methuselah life, free from many of the typical mortal ills. In the beginning, all she'd wanted was to cure one of the few Collegiate friends she'd made of his illness.

Color was an indispensable part of making one's way around the world, from identifying signs to checking how a potion is coming along. The retina was merely a receptive surface of the brain; what was *seen* was intrinsically linked to what could be *thought*. Perceived color could even alter how things *tasted*.

The fact that everyone's color perception was different was such a chore. Simple conversations would be interrupted by misalignments—you couldn't even tell the other person of the joys of the sights you had seen.

However, as Nanna learned of the internal workings of sight alongside the Setting Sun cadre, she noticed something: everything the body experiences is created by the brain.

Impairment of color perception couldn't solely be attributed to damage to the retina or optic nerve; it could also occur due to problems in the brain. In some cases, psychological factors could bring about physical changes in the body too.

In other words, our *minds* could affect our bodies.

The brain was the stronghold of one's ego—the absolute boundary that allows an individual to say, “I am me and you are you.” In other words, *all phenomena* are nothing more than reactions in our brains—feelings triggered by sensory stimuli.

These idle thoughts became firm beliefs when she rifled through the notes of an acquaintance in Setting Sun who was studying the makeup of the brain. As she read, she was struck by its power. If someone was given a pill of sugar-coated ash and told it was poison, their bodies would writhe in pain, but on the other hand, if they were told it was a panacea for some illness, their condition would improve.

At the end of the day, our worlds were nothing more than emotions and perceptions—stimuli that our cells received in order to recreate the world around us, completely independent of how it may actually appear.

When Nanna reached this conclusion, everything in her world lost its purpose; everything she saw was nothing more than a charade playing out in the tiny confines of her skull. The delicious taste of black tea infused just right, the dazzling sight of the dawn sun and the hope it instilled in one's heart, the rushing emotion from seeing verdant trees come back into bloom—at the end

of the day, all of these feelings were illusions of the sensory nervous system.

If that were so, then it didn't matter what the true nature of the world was—surely stimuli on their own would bring sufficient happiness.

Nanna's friend couldn't perceive color—Nanna's reds were simply grays to him, his world daubed only in a dull monochrome. In other words, one's brain and neurons rendered the fundamental elements of the world that we shared completely different.

It was then that Nanna decided to seek salvation through magic that dealt with the mind.

Reality was false—nothing more than a show that played out in our heads. By this same token, with perfect control over the chemical mechanisms that governed one's senses and reactions, one could live in a state of permanent bliss; practiced at scale, the whole world would be only a dose away from paradise. If she managed that, then her research on the unique properties of methuselah bodies would become worthless.

Nanna had stepped up as her own number one guinea pig for the sake of reaching the depths of knowledge. However, even after breaking the rules to enter the innermost depths of the College's library, she was still far from her goals.

“Are you feeling all right?” Erich asked.

“Quite fine...thank you,” Nanna replied.

However, there was something she had realized. Where most people sought to make the dreams—the *hell*—that played out inside their jostling, busy heads that little bit more bearable, this boy, Erich of Konigstuhl, had said that there was worth in those dreams. He found joy with where he stood in the here and now, chasing his dream of becoming an adventurer.

Nanna thought Goldilocks was quite deranged. People only went on adventures for the loot and fame that came *afterward*. However, over the little time they had spent conversing, Nanna had come to realize that, lunatic that he was, his feelings were genuine.

Despite the deadly foes that lumbered toward him, the difficulties that stood

in his way, the mental struggles he brought upon himself—he would cut through them all and give a victory cry at the end. This was the life of an adventurer, to transform all these hardships into joy and contentment.

What a strange creature she had tried to meddle with.

“I was merely thinking about...how you were enjoying your life.”

“Are you teasing me? I didn’t do something to warrant it, did I...?”

The College dropout smirked at the clearly troubled lad before her, visions of hell playing out in her mind. Erich found pure and utter joy in life itself. In her heart, Nanna prayed that in time her potions would allow her to reach such a state.

[Tips] The fun of TRPGs comes from talking, role-playing, and taking on challenges together. It goes without saying that adventures, too, aren’t a means to an end—the fun is in the adventure itself.

A Devil’s Knowledge

The young mage was deep in thought as she gazed upon her mortar and pestle—the signature tool of her profession, which her family had taken as its crest.

A concocter of potions played a vital role in any adventuring party. Cuts, bruises, deadly illnesses, broken bones—all of these would grow into much graver concerns unless someone was there to patch things up early on. If you chose to take on the role of healer, then it made complete sense to specialize in this one role.

But Kaya had realized that this alone wouldn’t be enough.

During one of her jobs, Kaya had been there to see a vicious gang of bandits repelled, thanks to the tactical input of Erich—the adventurer who’d invited her and Dirk along in the first place. Erich’s plan had been devised to cause the least bloodshed possible; regardless, the most tenacious of the bandits were left with grievous injuries, well beyond her power to fix. She knew that Erich was cut from more compassionate cloth than most other adventurers—though he

claimed that he stopped at slicing off fingers for the increased reward—but if he realized a foe would become a nuisance if left alive, even he would cut throats with the swiftness of a farmer reaping the harvest.

The fountains of blood, the sudden death rattle—the battlefield was strewn with destruction that Kaya could never fix.

But swords weren't the only tools of bloodshed—the knight-killing might of crossbows and bolts, the gouging power of spears, the bone-crushing power of maces, and the unique horrors of combat magic all left unique wounds that demanded unique solutions.

It was a blessing that Dirk had somehow avoided any such harm this whole time. She knew it had all hinged on pure luck. He had been blessed with his own strength, powerful allies, and time, and so for now the scales tipped in his favor.

Kaya's hand and the pestle clutched within it shook as she wondered what she would do if he ended up with an injury that she couldn't fix. She wasn't yet skilled enough to reattach a severed finger. Even if she did manage it, it wouldn't move as it once had. If Dirk's guts were shredded by a sword, then she would have nothing left to do but throw her hands up in despair. Or if death came in an instant, from a blade to the neck or a crushing blow to his skull, then the flame of life would be snuffed out before she could even move to act.

“I need to do more. I need to get better...stronger...more talented.”

But her work couldn't keep pace with her goals.

There was a wonder medicine passed down through Kaya's family that had the miraculous ability to bring a person back from death's doorstep. Yet it was a hugely difficult potion to concoct, and even among her ancestors, only three people in her family's entire history had ever managed to recreate the formula; even Kaya's mother hadn't managed it. Potion concocting wasn't like cooking, where all you needed to do was follow a recipe. Many factors influenced the brewing process—the degree of the concocter's mana, its quality, how much control you exerted, and the quality of the catalyst. The Nyx family's most precious potions even took into consideration the temperature, humidity, and position of the stars.

Kaya had watched her mother concoct a whole variety of potions, but she was

still yet immature. If she were to set to the task immediately and put in her every effort to try and make the miracle cure, the result would be a bottle of slop that wouldn't even be graced with the label of "failure." All the same, she couldn't exactly ask Dirk to avoid danger until the day she could concoct it. Nothing could place those shameful words upon her tongue. Dirk was the one who took her to see the wider world as he proclaimed to one day become a legend-worthy hero. If she said something so disheartening, she would only get in the way.

"I know... I'll work on protective magic!"

Kaya's struggles with the hard-and-fast manipulation of reality and her rare gift for making potions stemmed from one source—an oath she didn't even know she'd sworn. She had, through means unknown and perhaps unknowable, materialized an ancient method which allowed one to channel resources away from multiple areas and redirect them to one talent in particular. This oath brought with it amplified abilities at the cost of only using her potions to create curative effects. However, she had just hit upon a spark which would allow her to sidestep this: protective magic.

Washing your hands, taking baths, cleaning your clothes—cleanliness was a preventative form of care that stopped you getting sick, and a valuable part of medical treatment. That logic could be taken to the battlefield—if Kaya could use her potions to prevent her allies from getting hurt, then that would be classed as a form of healing, right?

"Arrow-deflecting magic... Yeah, I *know* I made some notes about it."

The most valuable resource that she had taken with her before she'd run away from home for good was knowledge. The Nyx family made it a tradition for each member to write their own ingredient lists and recipes, so that they could hone and perfect the medicines that the age required. In Kaya's own notes, she had written copies of the potions that she thought may come in handy.

"We'll need something to keep us safe if we end up outnumbered."

Flicking to the later pages of her notes, she found some of the scribbles she had jotted down on the previous job with Erich. As they had talked, Kaya had

realized that all manner of unexpected things could rain down upon her dearest friend. If she didn't make sure Dirk had a protective barrier or warding charms, then he could have his faculties wrecked by wicked tear gas; it didn't even have to be directed at him; a formula could remove the friction from the ground beneath his very feet and cause him to stumble.

When Erich had been telling her all this, she had simply brushed it off as a cautionary tale of the horrible ideas people come up with, but then she realized that this knowledge could be used to protect Dirk. She didn't need to kill anyone, didn't need to hurt anyone. All she had to do was make sure the dangers that flew his way never reached him.

"I can do this...I think."

Kaya murmured to herself as she checked her catalysts and her remaining funds. Nothing would change about her desire to help people. It wouldn't go against her family's teachings or against the oath, not *really*.

But there was something that Kaya didn't realize: learning magic to protect Dirk from great dangers would only push him toward ever more deadly battlefields. As they say, the road to hell is paved with good intentions.

[Tips] Upon birth, people can unintentionally bind themselves. Whether this shortcoming becomes a strength or a lethal failing hinges on one's perspective.

A Peaceful Day on the Job

Wherever rookie adventurers can be found, so can their grasping, scheming seniors.

These thugs dressed in adventurers' clothing didn't wish to impart any knowledge to their younger fellows; they saw them as nothing more than open coin purses on legs.

Most newbies had brought some funds along from their hometowns in order to start a new life. Obviously the amount varied from person to person, with some only coming with a handful of coins from household chores and others

with a drachma or two slipped into their breast pocket from generous parents, but what bound them together was the reassuring weight of metal.

In other words, they were the perfect targets for a little group pestering.

Three such greedy adventurer-thugs had set their sights on a certain golden-haired adventurer. He had been hired as a bodyguard—in truth a chore boy—for a seedy tavern, but his appearance was a cut above your average rookie. Long hair was a sign of a life lived in moderate security; most boys favored short hair for ease and the fact that hair could be used as free tinder. However, the young man before them had applied hair oil to his and fixed it up in a neat chignon bun. Yes, there was no doubt that he was from a well-off family—a spoiled son who had lived a life of luxury but had decided to coat himself in soot. In other words, easy pickings.

“Hey there, fella! Yeah, you with the goldilocks!”

One of the three called out with a grin to the newbie adventurer, who was in the middle of mopping, his sleeves rolled up.

“Yes? Drinks, is it? I’m not one of the floor staff, but I can help.”

Seeing the young man’s pleasant smile, the three thugs sneered inwardly, realizing that this would be an even easier mark than they had first realized. None had failed to miss his palatial tongue—this was a dyed-in-the-wool spoiled kid, raised in the safety of his mama’s breast, who had never had a bad dream in his life.

“You’re a newbie adventurer, yeah? We’re also in the biz. Shout us some booze and we’ll tell ya a bunch of useful stories.”

This was a common tactic—force the younger adventurer to sit at the table and drink his wallet dry under the pretense of a few “insider tips.”

“Yeah, full of dead bandits.”

“Just as my buddy here said! I’ve cut down six already.”

“Only six? I’ve cut down eight!”

The three thugs cut straight to showing off. If they demonstrated their mettle from the get-go, then the spoiled country mouse would be quaking in his boots

enough to cough up some cash to avoid any trouble.

Yet the newbie didn't respond how they expected. No, he *laughed*. With his hand over his mouth in a stuck-up manner.

"What's got you laughin', squirt?"

"Oh? I thought you guys were joking."

"You *what*?!"

However, the gold-haired newbie didn't blanch in the slightest.

"Bandits are to adventurers as crops are to farmers. I'm rather pleased to hear you've lived such blessed lives to still be able to count the lives you've taken on two hands."

Little did the adventurers know that their own boasts seemed little more than child's play to Erich of Konigstuhl. Erich wasn't sure whether to laugh or be a little jealous of the peaceful lives they'd led. After all, Erich had long since lost track of how many his own sword had cut down.

"You are aware of what will come of trying to shill me, aren't you?"

His smile vanished as quickly as it had come, his point made before the thugs' hands could find their weapons in a moment of rage. The newbie's slender, girlish face was pale and full of anger.

"This tavern is frequented by respectable types. Am I understood, *friends*?"

None of the thugs could move. They had intended to teach him a quick lesson in manners at the ends of their blades, but the only sound that could be heard was their swords clattering in their sheaths under their trembling hands.

Fear had rushed through all of their hearts. That hand which had so daintily hid his mouth now clutched one of the empty tankards on the table, playing with their fight-or-flight instincts.

We're gonna die. The flash of his blue eyes behind those narrowed lids contained a deep, honed killing instinct that even they could see.

"If you're so skilled that you can find the time to teach a little brat like me, then you're at peace with the idea the job might kill you at any moment, yes?"

The newbie's refined speech was replaced by a vicious tone in an instant, his words conjuring images of wicked ends. The wooden tankard in his hand could be a brutal bludgeon. Their eyes could be crushed, their noses broken, their throats pulverized—Erich could do any of these gruesome things in a simple move; they knew that. They were frozen to the spot in fear—they couldn't even swallow. Perhaps satisfied with their fear, the young man sheathed his metaphorical sword and put back the charming grin expected of a day laborer.

“I'm glad to see that you all understand. Let me see... The bill comes to seventy-two assarii in total.”

The thugs looked at his outstretched hand—pointing to the exit—then to their weapons, and after a few seconds they made the right choice. They paid up and resolved not to deal with such a petrifying individual.

As they left, the young adventurer mumbled to himself.

“None of them bothered to notice I stiffed them for an extra ten. Well, I suppose we can chalk up the difference to a little private tuition.”

While tutting that everyone should learn some basic arithmetic, Erich handed the pay to the barkeep and returned to his cleaning. The time ticked on as he plugged away at his peaceful yet dull gig.

[Tips] If you choose a job that involves violence, you must accept that violence may interrupt your daily life at any point. If you choose to bare your fangs, don't be surprised when your prey snaps back.

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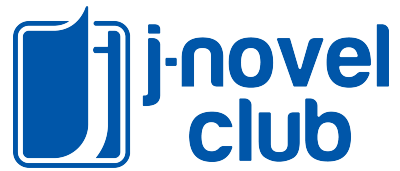
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Min-Maxing My TRPG Build in Another World: Volume 8

by Schuld

Translated by Arthur Miura Edited by Will Holcomb

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