



EASYGOING TERRITORY DEFENSE

by the
Optimistic Lord

~PRODUCTION MAGIC Turns a Nameless Village
into the STRONGEST FORTIFIED CITY~

NOVEL

4

Written by
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Ortho

"This
is bad!
Dee,
protect
me!"

"Under-
stood!"

Dee

Van

Building a Fortress Behind Enemy Lines?!

《Till》

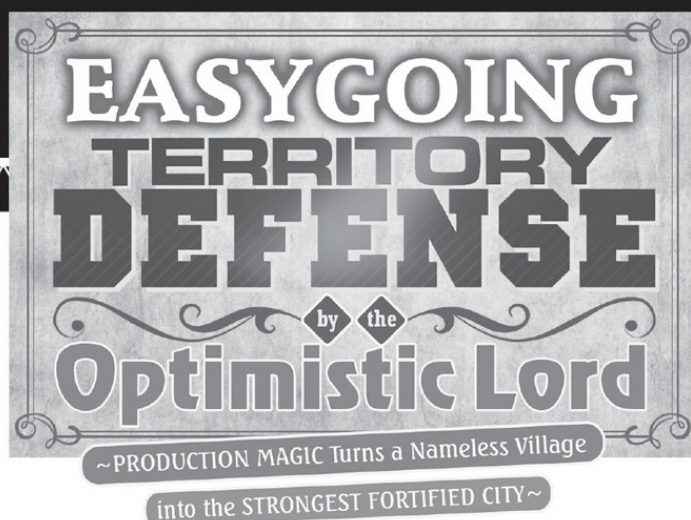
《Khamzin》

“Here,
Lord Van,
have some.”

《Arte》

“...Mm,
delicious!”





NOVEL

4

WRITTEN BY

Sou Akaike

ILLUSTRATED BY

Kururi



Seven Seas Entertainment

EASYGOING TERRITORY DEFENSE BY THE OPTIMISTIC LORD:
PRODUCTION MAGIC TURNS A NAMELESS VILLAGE INTO THE
STRONGEST FORTIFIED CITY (LIGHT NOVEL) VOL. 4

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Prologue: Those Left Behind

EVEN AVOIDING THE CROWDED CENTER, MARCHING a bunch of soldiers in heavy armor through a deep mountain range was never going to be a walk in the park. Worse, the soldiers would have to make camp along steep cliffs or in narrow stretches of wilderness.

And then there were the monsters.

Because the Wolfsbrook Mountain Range was such a vast, treacherous place, powerful monsters made it their home. The proof was in the pudding: Seatoh Village, seated at the foot of the mountains, was always being attacked by strong beasts. Even today, the village was fielding an assault from a group of large white-scaled wolves, creatures known to hunt in packs. They were swift as the wind, too; normally you'd need five or more knights working together to take one down. A pack could be expected to inflict significant casualties on even a Chivalric Order with mages in tow.

The people of Seatoh Village were used to being besieged by monsters, though, so they lacked any sense of urgency.

"Lord Van! Commander Dee has dispatched the machine bow squad in case any of them get past the ballistae!"

"Their meat *is* delicious... Tell him to be careful not to get hurt."

"Yessir!" The soldier who'd come to report to me sprinted back to his post.

If it wasn't clear from that exchange, the folks in Seatoh Village saw white-scaled wolves as little more than dinner. A normal village could rake in a profit by selling a white-scaled wolf's tough, pliable hide, so in that sense, we really were blessed. In many ways, the health of our economy and our quality of life far exceeded the royal capital's.

Oh, Seatoh Village, my wonderful home... All we're missing is a good confectionary shop.

"I wonder how the folks marching through the Wolfsbrook Mountain Range are doing. Ortho and his people told me they don't like dealing with nobles and knights... I hope they aren't getting into any fights." I cast my gaze out the manor's window toward the mountains and exhaled a gentle sigh.

Till was preparing some tea. In a surprised tone, she said, "I do not suspect Ortho and the others would do anything to cause trouble."

I smirked and turned to her. "When I told him that the king wanted to hire them as escorts and bodyguards against monsters, Ortho made such a face. I wish you could've seen him, Till. But when I told him how much he'd get paid, well, he made another wild face."

Till blinked at me. "I see... In that case, perhaps he sees you less as a noble lord and more as a sort of mayor and village elder? That would explain why he's happy to deal with you."

I chuckled dryly at Till's accidental jab. "A-a village elder...? Suddenly I feel decrepit." My thoughts turned back to Scuderia's army, and the challenges they were sure to face on their march. I sipped my fresh tea and said, from the bottom of my heart, "I'm so glad I didn't have to go."

"I feel bad for Ortho and the others," said Till, ever the worrier, "but I'm also quite happy that you did not have to go!"

She beamed, and I couldn't help but smile back. *Man, if the knights on the march overheard any of this, they would be so pissed off.*

I stood from my chair. "Well then, it's time to do my job as the village lord!"

"Good luck!" replied Till with gusto.

Chapter 1:

Those Headed to the Wolfsbrook Mountain Range

Ventury

EVERY SO OFTEN, I RECEIVED REPORTS THAT THE adventurers had spotted another monster. As soon as these reports were made, I would then be informed that the monster had been dispatched with no casualties to our forces.

Suffice to say, His Majesty had made a wise choice in hiring adventurers.

In a typical worst-case scenario, we would select a mountain road that we could traverse over the course of a single day. Anything more than that and we would have to select a different route entirely. But these adventurers solved that problem for us. It was incredible.

“I should have expected as much from His Majesty.”

Were adventurers always so skilled? Plenty of Chivalric Orders had hired them in the past, but the practice seemed to have died off at some point—or at least, I hadn’t heard tell of it since I became a lord.

Knights tended to be better fighters, for obvious reasons. They had to pass a fierce selection exam, then underwent daily training. Their martial education rested on a strong foundation, and they were trained to fight not only as single units, but also in formation. They drilled in small, medium, and large groups to prepare themselves to face anything from an opposing army to a large monster. Adventurers, on the other hand, specialized in exploration, manhunts, extraction, and investigation. Most operated in groups of four to five, and because they anticipated battles against monsters or bandits, they used traps and neurotoxins to complete quests as safely as possible.

Put simply, adventurers might encounter monsters and bandits, but they rarely fought them *head-on*—so they lacked a knight’s skill in combat. I had heard of adventurers who hunted down large monsters in small groups, but

they were relatively uncommon.

Or at least, so I'd thought. The adventurers His Majesty hired from Seatoh Village were making me question everything I knew.

If they located a large monster hundreds of meters ahead, they immediately led it away to clear our route. When they spotted a mid-sized or smaller beast, they killed it before news of the sighting could even reach me. And mid-sized monsters like red bears and scaled wolves were no laughing matter. It could take twenty or more knights to defeat such powerful foes on level terrain. If a group of red bears appeared in my territory, I would dispatch a Chivalric Order of one to two hundred men to take care of them. But the adventurers of Seatoh Village, who operated in groups of five to ten, each took down mid-sized beasts with ease.

"What's going on with that village?" I racked my brain but came up with no answer.

If they were in fact equipped with dwarven armaments, it would explain their impressive skill in combat...but could they really *afford* that? Moreover, I was dubious as to whether they could supply sufficiently pure iron ore to satisfy the dwarves. As far as I could tell, based on a cursory look at their forge, it had only been built recently. They hadn't spent years on its construction.

That was when I remembered Lord Van's magic. With abnormal abilities like his, perhaps it was possible to craft armaments equivalent to those of dwarven mark? While the cornerstone of any fighting force was the number and skill of its mages, it was important not to discount the importance of equipment. In the end, most battles were decided by the number of troops on the field.

"If I can win over that boy, it will be a simple task to strengthen our Chivalric Order," I whispered. *What if... What if I could create a Chivalric Order with equipment just as good as that made by the dwarves?*

Merely imagining the strength of such a force felt obscene. Dwarven swords were even said to be capable of slicing through dragon scales. *Imagine if*

thousands of knights had that in their possession. They would be invincible.

Just thinking about it was enough to raise my spirits, but I abruptly snapped back to reality. “No, wait... If I fail to acquire that boy’s power while other nobles successfully win him over, my house will...”

A chill ran down my spine.

Sometimes, when someone was *too* useful, they became a threat—and were killed by those in power to prevent their skills from falling into someone else’s hands. To a noble who cared for their house, this was both a viable means of protecting said house and a temptation that was difficult to resist. Anyone who got their hands on such power would milk it for all it was worth, but if there was a risk someone else might acquire it first and use it against you, nipping it in the bud was a sensible move.

“I barely have a relationship with the boy as it stands. But who can say what tomorrow will bring? For now, I will wait and see.”

I couldn’t afford to be rash—but if I spent too much time deliberating, I might lose my chance to act. I had to pay close attention to how the other factions moved.

First, I had to understand how Lord Van thought and what choices he would make in the battle to come. I needed to know whether he would be an asset to the kingdom and my house. And depending on the answer to that question, I would decide whether to kill the boy or let him live.

Jalpa

IT WAS ABSOLUTELY ABSURD. WHY SHOULD VAN, OF ALL people, be the one gifted with such magical aptitude?

Thanks to him, a lot of nobles now considered me the incompetent lord who’d banished his talented son. They should have been *praising* me for making my useless son the lord of his own region, even if that region was remote.

Under normal circumstances, that was what you would call an unmerited post. At least from an outside perspective, my decision should have seemed entirely justified no matter how things turned out.

After all, when a talentless child was born to a noble family, it was common practice to hide that child from the world. In the best-case scenario, they were locked away in the family residence. In the worst, they were murdered the moment their magical aptitude was discovered, erasing their existence. That was why it was standard to appraise a child's magical aptitude before openly celebrating their birth.

However...

Unforeseen circumstances had led to Van becoming a household name long before he could be appraised. Before I became a marquis, I hired the daughters of knights and landless barons as maids. Perhaps that was my mistake. Rumors spread among those maids, as well as my footmen, that Van was a genius. It was around that time that I began to catch wind of other nobles whose territories neighbored mine speaking as though they had heard of Van.

So when I learned that Van lacked magical talent, my first thought was to kill him immediately—but I missed my opportunity. Murcia's advice gave me pause, certainly, but more than that, I was leery of a scandal. Still, my decision was sound. I had just seized a chunk of Count Ferdinatto's territory which I was unable to administer myself. Putting my own son in charge of that land would show not only the other nobles but also my citizens that I was a good and proper lord. Whether Van lived or died, they would regard me as such.

Unfortunately, things hadn't gone how I planned.

The child should have presided over a destitute village. Instead, he slew a dragon. The only aid he received when he left home was three knights who wished to go with him and an old mage. A boy slave and a maid had accompanied him too, but any aid they could provide would have been insignificant, as would that of the village's hundred or so residents. So how did

he manage to slay a dragon?

That was why I initially thought it all a farce. I briefly suspected Count Ferdinatto of providing aid in order to make the boy his puppet, though the return on that investment would not have been worth the effort. But I was wrong. I knew nothing about Van's magic, so I put off investigating Seatoh Village.

Then, before I knew it, Van's accomplishments were being recognized by His Majesty himself. He was granted a title, and a chunk of my territory was taken from me and given to him. Adding insult to injury, a dungeon was discovered in the region. Seatoh Village itself was no great loss, but the discovery of the dungeon made it something else entirely. Its utility and economic value would have been massive.

Surely the boy wouldn't have delayed reporting the dragon incident to avoid being stripped of his accomplishments? The same went for the discovery of the dungeon. It must have been a stroke of good fortune that, as Seatoh Village was repairing its wall and buildings after the forest dragon incident, Viscount Panamera happened to stop by. As a result, the news reached the king's ears before they did mine.

That must have been how it happened. Van's powers were suited to territorial defense. The village was cooperative. A large dragon appeared just as the village grew capable of defending itself...and then, with perfect timing, Viscount Panamera arrived at the village.

All of these factors came miraculously together, enabling Van to acquire a title and independence in one fell swoop.

This was the greatest misfortune I could ever imagine befalling House Fertio. The crux of the issue was His Majesty's awareness of Van's power. His Majesty valued results over all else. He took people's past accomplishments into consideration when evaluating them, and if they went on to further distinguish themselves, he would not hesitate to provide them with the aid necessary for

him to make use of their talents on a larger scale.

As soon as His Majesty turned his attention to Van, the apkallu and the dungeon were discovered. And if that weren't enough, the boy got his hands on dwarven blacksmiths. That would certainly boost his social status.

"I have to do something to prevent that child from distinguishing himself any further," I murmured.

Should His Majesty reward Van with more territory, the only viable options were to take from my land or Count Ferdinatto's. I had to sabotage Van and cause him to fail in front of the king.

"Those container bases Van made will be key to this march. If I can find some sort of weakness in them..."

Just then, Stradale spoke from outside the window. "Do you need something?"

Being the serious man that he was, he must have heard me. I cleared my throat. "No, I was simply speaking to myself. Pay me no mind."

"Yes sir," he said deferentially.

I cast my gaze toward the vista beyond the window. The sky was clear and blue, but the brisk wind would be hard on the soldiers when it came time to make camp. My experience with all manner of open combat had taught me that the battlefield and its surrounding environment were just as important as the enemy's forces in determining the course of the battle.

This was true of all Chivalric Orders. For example, take a pack of simple bandits. Should they try to lead the order's knights deep into the perilous depths of the mountains, it would be no mean feat to annihilate them. First, the Chivalric Order would have to remain alert for monsters. Second, marching and making camp in such terrain was an ordeal; spending the whole day deep in the woods or mountains left no time for rest. You had to be constantly on alert, wary of any changes in the environment, and juggling logistics to boot. That was

why any Chivalric Order with proper combat experience would be grateful for the simple facilities that Van provided.

The other nobles felt similarly. Bases of operation that were sturdier than tents would make this march significantly more comfortable. If it rained, everybody would be praising Van's name, His Majesty included.

"Is it possible for someone not directly participating in the war effort to be celebrated for distinguished service...?" I whispered. Then I fell silent again, thinking.

Up to this point, His Majesty had always valued direct military service over all else. Killing an enemy officer on the battlefield, destroying a defensive position, breaking an enemy's formation: these feats were simple to grasp and typically earned the most accolades. I doubted Van would reach *those* heights, but it was possible he could rack up some accomplishments only barely second to them. Combined with everything he'd already achieved, that was bound to see him rewarded with more territory.

In other words—either I would lose my land, or Count Ferdinatto would lose his.

"I must avoid that at all costs," I said to myself.

With that, still seated in my carriage, I began formulating a plan to protect my house's status after the war.

Ortho

I EVADED THE GIANT BOAR'S CHARGE AND SLICED through the back of its knee. Down a front leg, the boar smashed headfirst into the ground. The earth itself shook with the impact and the boar tumbled over itself, swinging its tusks wildly. Its movements were desperate, but its massive body and huge tusks could easily knock down a few trees.

I leapt forward and issued my order: "Machine bows, now!"

“On it!” replied Kusala in his usual lackadaisical tone. He fired off three consecutive arrows from his position atop a tree, hitting the boar in the head. It jumped twice, then collapsed, motionless, to the ground.

Our buddies on support duty started to cheer and laugh. “Hell yeah! These things are delicious!”

“Thank goodness. Trail rations ain’t exactly the best for morale.”

But Pluriel, who had been hiding in the rear, looked displeased. She was bored with our food choices. “We’ve eaten nothing but meat for a week. Can we please forage some wild plants or fruits?”

Kusala shrugged, frowning. “I get where yer comin’ from, but with monsters attacking us all the time, we can’t exactly go on a leisurely fruit-picking stroll.”

But Pluriel had hit her limit. “Oh, please. Right now, all it takes is Ortho in the vanguard and you sniping from the rear to take these things down. If someone watches my back, I can easily go forage something.”

“You know that’s a bad idea,” I protested, unconvinced by Pluriel’s logic. She shot me a fierce glare, but I raised both hands to hold her off, having no desire to get into a fight over it. “One or two monsters at once, sure, we can handle that. But if something else pops up, that’s going to be a problem. Our job is to clear the path and provide support for the army—it’ll be bad if we let any monsters slip through.”

Pluriel frowned and looked behind us, where a group of knights in heavy armor marched along the perilous mountain road. “About that. Can’t these knights handle most monsters? Why are we the ones doing all the fighting?”



Her tone implied that she already knew the answer to that question, so I sighed and waved a hand. “They’d be screwed. We’re taking basically no casualties from engaging these things, but if the Chivalric Orders had to tackle each monster, the whole march would be affected and they’d probably lose some soldiers. Now, if they’d tamed some low-level dragons or something like Yelenetta did, that would be a different story, but there’s no use thinking about stuff we don’t got.”

Kusala smirked and raised his hands. One held Lord Van’s knife, the other a machine bow. “The reason this entire war has been on Scuderian land is because this road is so dangerous. We’re makin’ it look easy thanks to Van’s super-strong weapons, but if we had normal equipment, we’d probably already be dead.”

“Okay, yeah, the machine bows are a huge help. Even without a mage, we can take down monsters from afar. I get it, I get it. Sorry for asking such a dumb question. I just got a little annoyed.”

“It’s no biggie. I’m just glad this didn’t turn into a fight,” I replied with a smile.

Pluriel was a smart woman, so this conversation was all it took for her to come to terms with her own feelings on the topic. I knew she would return to doing her job and doing it well.

“...That being said, we’re only halfway through, huh? I’m honestly a bit worried,” I whispered to myself, looking at my friends’ backs.

Our various parties of adventurers were providing aid to the long line of marching Chivalric Orders. My group, at the vanguard, was under the most stress, but the other parties also had large areas to contend with. It wasn’t easy for any of us. The Chivalric Orders were transporting everything by carriage, but the journey still took a physical toll, because we didn’t have much time to rest. After all, we had to stay on patrol even while the Chivalric Orders took breaks. That was what we’d been hired to do. We couldn’t afford to relax.

Our parties got together every day to exchange information, but Pluriel and

the others were becoming restless. It was easy for others to forget that adventurers like us normally operated in small groups, exploring and hunting as we pleased. We weren't used to being ordered around by knights, and it was creating tension.

I would have loved to make it to our destination as fast as possible so that we could turn right around and head home, but the size of the army kept us moving at a slow pace. We were receiving orders to put together temporary bases, but the sad reality was that we wouldn't get to rest in them.

"I really hope nobody gets into a fight," I said to myself, jogging to catch up to Kusala and the others.

The next day, my biggest fear became reality. A party of adventurers near the center of the formation got into a scuffle with the knights.

I stopped the march immediately and headed to the scene of the fight, arriving to find a group of knights shouting furiously. Looking around, I spotted a group of adventurers glaring at them from a distance.

I approached them and asked, "What the hell happened?"

One man in the group looked at me and then pointed at the knights. "Those bastards destroyed the base we made. We went out of our way to use some of our break time to build it for them, and they just... They said the base must've been made wrong." He clicked his tongue.

"Pompous jerks," one of his comrades put in.

I tilted my head. "Wait, they destroyed it? Those things are tough as hell. How'd they manage that?"

The man clicked his tongue again and glared at the knights. "They claim the base we built collapsed on its own, but as the folks actually assembling the things, we know how hard they are to break once they're all set up. You gotta raise the ceiling to break it down, 'cause the walls won't fold inward otherwise.

If you use it the *normal* way, it would never collapse.” His voice dripped venom.

“Hold on a second. You’re saying these knights, our allies, went out of their way to make the base unusable? But why?”

“Hell if I know.”

“Are the Chivalric Orders fighting amongst themselves?”

“Nah, I’d say they’re just trying to screw with us. You know how much they hate adventurers.”

The men theorized amongst themselves, but if we didn’t get to the bottom of this, I was certain we’d have problems going forward.

As I pondered what to do, Pluriel spoke up from behind me. “Hey, what if they aren’t trying to mess with us specifically?”

“Huh?” I turned around to see Pluriel standing there, looking grave. The other adventurers tilted their heads at her.

Once she was sure all eyes were on her, Pluriel continued. “They have nothing to gain from making these temp bases unusable or quarreling with us.”

We all exchanged glances. “That’s true.”

“Sure, but you can find idiots anywhere, right?”

“They’d have to be morons to do this.”

We brainstormed possible reasons the knights would do something like this, but none of us could come up with a satisfying answer. Then Pluriel spoke again. “I have a theory, but I can’t say anything just yet. Do you think we can talk to the knights who said the base collapsed on its own?”

Kusala was the first to react. “I-I think that’s probably a bad idea. Whatever actually happened, those guys are pissed as hell. If you go over there, yer just gonna be throwin’ oil on the fire.”

“Excuse me?”

In the face of Pluriel’s fierce gaze, Kusala said, “Ah, forget I said anything!”

Pluriel's apparent displeasure with Kusala's fear seemed wholly unreasonable. "Most guys would calm down if a young woman came over to talk to them, but Pluriel inspires the opposite reaction..."

"Did you say something, Ortho?"

"Ah, nope. Not a thing."

I was pretty sure I had kept my whisper quiet, but Pluriel's eyes flashed as soon as I spoke. I decided to keep my mouth shut on that particular topic. Instead, I cleared my throat and looked at the guys who were involved with the quarrel. "So did they say how the base collapsed?"

"They said about ten people were resting inside when they heard a loud noise and the walls started to collapse, I think?"

"Right, right. And they managed to hold the walls up long enough to get out. They were yelling about the base being defective and stuff."

"Man, just thinking about it is pissing me off all over again."

The men began to complain, recalling the events. But I was mostly puzzled. "Defective? They weren't saying you constructed it wrong?"

The men all blinked at me. Pluriel let out a small sigh and looked at us. "Yeah, we need to talk to those guys. If you don't want me engaging with them, will you talk to them for me?"

I nodded. "What should I ask about?"

Pluriel narrowed her eyes. "What order they're affiliated with and who their commanding officer is. If I'm on the right track, this is going to happen again, and I suspect the same CO will be involved."

I sensed a quiet fury in her tone, and hearing her words, I arrived at what I suspected was the same answer she had. It was all conjecture, but rage was boiling inside me nonetheless.

"Well," I said, "ain't this something. Sorry, Kusala, can you do the talking for me?"

The man of the hour nodded, laughing dryly. “No problem. I can see yer all fumin’, so I’ll handle it.”

“Thanks. Try to get as much info out of them as you can without making them upset.”

“You got it, boss!” He chuckled, waving a hand before heading off toward the angry knights.

Perhaps it was his personality, but Kusala could butter up anyone. He was perfect for this job. As if to prove it, he was already chatting with the knights, holding a hand up. It didn’t exactly look like a fun conversation, but they didn’t turn him away.

Pluriel shrugged. “He really is good at this kind of thing.”

“Maybe managing a hotel is the perfect gig for him.”

We went back and forth, keeping an eye on Kusala. Suddenly, he stopped moving and looked up at the knight closest to him. A few moments passed in stillness, and I thought that he might just be listening to the man, but then, out of nowhere, he smashed his fist into the knight’s face.

Even from where we stood, I could hear something crunch.

“...What?”

Pluriel was shocked and slow to react, but fortunately, I snapped to my senses sooner. I sprinted toward Kusala, leaving Pluriel behind in stunned silence.

“Kusala, you idiot!”

“Say that again, you two-bit knight! I’ll kill you!” Kusala bellowed.

I’d never heard him so angry before. I wasn’t certain I’d be able to stop him.

“What the hell is your problem?! How dare you lay your hands on me, you lowly adventurer! Do you understand what you’ve done?” The middle-aged knight’s nose was bleeding, his eyes wide and shocked.

Kusala gripped the handle of his sword, and I felt the blood drain from my

face. “Do not draw, Kusala!” I shouted, furious.

My energetic intrusion into the confrontation caused the knights to falter a bit, so I pulled Kusala away, even as he overflowed with rage. “Take it down a notch,” I hissed, trying to calm him. “You’re dealing with a Chivalric Order. There might be a count or marquis pulling the strings here—their CO could be higher in rank than a lord knight. I know you’re angry, but you have to apologize, even if you don’t mean it.”

Kusala clenched his fists tightly, trembling. “Ortho, boss. I can’t do that. There are things even I can’t forgive.”

“I’m begging you, Kusala. Bottle up that rage. I get where you’re coming from, even if I don’t know what they said to you. I’ll ask Lord Van for his thoughts later, I promise. Please calm down.”

I grabbed his shoulders and desperately tried to pull him back. We stood like that for a few seconds, and finally Kusala took a deep breath. The tension released from his shoulders.

“...I get it. I got a li’l too hot headed, eh? Sorry.”

Seeing him calm down, I heaved a deep sigh of relief. “It’s okay. And thanks.”

Pluriel chose that moment to pop up. “I’ve never seen you like that before. What the heck did they say to you?” She already looked displeased.

Kusala frowned. “They started off insulting us adventurers, which is no skin off my nose. The nobility, the knights... They’re always doin’ that crap. But then they started insultin’ the quality of the temp bases, sayin’ they were the products of a kid’s dumb imagination. Then they went on about how Lord Van must’ve done something to curry favor, ’cause there was no way the king would ever approve using a child’s toy. They said he got chased out of his family for making garbage like this. As someone who knows Lord Van really well, I just couldn’t hold myself back no longer. Er...boss?”

Kusala was explaining things to Pluriel when he suddenly shot me a perplexed

look.

Not that I cared.

I turned to the knights and began to holler. “You sons of—! Say that one more goddamn time! Who the hell do you think you’re insulting?!”

“Whoa, whoa, Ortho! Pluriel, stop him! W-wait, why are you casting a spell?!”

“Get on your knees and beg for forgiveness!”

That was how, partway through the royal march, a group of adventurers and a group of knights came to clash spectacularly.

King Dino

I RECEIVED WORD OF A SKIRMISH BETWEEN ADVENTURERS and knights that had brought our march to a halt. Though I was resting in one of Lord Van’s container bases at the time, I had no choice but to deal with the problem.

“I anticipated conflict, but it’s unacceptable for the march to come to a stop. Who is quarreling?” I asked the chiliarch who delivered the report.

This chiliarch had been a commoner who took the knight exam, passed, and studied battle formations and tactics in great detail, leading him to earn the rank of commanding officer. There were few examples in history of a commoner rising through the ranks to become a chiliarch. Due to his serious disposition, I knew I could count on him to deliver an objective report. Other knights tended to protect their own.

He frowned even more severely than he normally did. “It was Baron Nouveau’s order. Ten of its members scrapped with a group of adventurers.”

“Hrm. Any injuries sustained?”

“Yes, most of them. They seem to have clashed in a small environment, so more than fifty individuals are being treated for wounds,” reported the chiliarch matter-of-factly.

I raised a hand to stop him. “Hold on. Fifty wounded? Please don’t tell me they killed the adventurers. Regardless of their opponents’ strength, why are so many injured after an attack by ten knights?”

I couldn’t make sense of any of this. Even if the baron’s Chivalric Order happened to be less than skilled, they still trained daily. The huge disparities between knights and adventurers really showed themselves when multiple groups clashed. Only a handful of upper-level adventurers could face a group of knights head on.

But the chiliarch shook his head. “Unfortunately, all the injured are from Lord Nouveau’s Chivalric Order and their attendants. The three adventurers they engaged emerged from the fight unharmed. I currently have them on standby in one of the container bases.”

“Are you telling me a group of fifty people, comprised of ten knights and their attendants, was defeated in a one-sided fight?” I asked, my voice tense. “Was there a first-class mage among the adventurers?”

Were Lord Nouveau’s knights that weak, or were the three adventurers that strong? Either way, this was alarming. The Chivalric Orders’ leadership and strength were the cornerstone of our national defense and the pillars of each city’s public order. If they were this much weaker than mere adventurers, we had a problem.

With those thoughts running through my head, my tone unintentionally pressed the man for answers. The chiliarch wore a complicated look.

“They appeared to have a capable mage on their side, but magic was only used to freeze the knights in place. The real problem came from the weapons the other two wielded.”

“The weapons?” I tilted my head, prompting the chiliarch to pull a severed iron sword from his cloak.

It was a commonplace straight sword, thick and not prone to breakage. But this sword had been sliced cleanly in half.

“Did they wield a great sword used for cutting down dragons?” I knew the answer, but I asked the question anyway.

The chiliarch shook his head. “No, it was a standard-sized sword. In fact, the blade was so thin that I would describe it as lightweight. To put it frankly, the adventurers were skilled enough to match a normal knight, but I believe the true reason for the knights’ loss was the horrific sharpness of the adventurers’ weapons. If they hadn’t gone easy on the knights, we would have fifty corpses on our hands.”

“Lord Van’s weapons, I surmise. I planned to make this a royal treasure, so I never checked its sharpness, but I imagine this weapon is just as sharp.” I drew the orichalcum sword from its scabbard.

The chiliarch’s eyes widened. “What a magnificent sword. Did that child make it as well?”

“Indeed. Right in front of me, no less.”

I gripped the sword and sliced through a nearby shield. The high-pitched shrill of metal clashing against metal echoed through the container, and as the chiliarch watched, shocked, a piece of the shield collapsed to the floor.

I must’ve made that same look the first time.

“It’s like when iron swords first began to displace copper weapons as the strongest arms. No, it’s really more like the difference between copper and mithril arms,” I whispered, exasperated.

I looked at my sword. It was truly a work of art, with not a single chip in the blade.

“I see. Now I understand how they were able to slay so many large monsters. So Lord Van’s Chivalric Order possesses these same weapons? How portentous.”

The halting of the march was a serious problem, but having once again been made aware of the power of Van’s weapons, I couldn’t help but smile.

“Your Majesty, how shall we punish them?”

“Hrm...”

I switched gears. Lord knights might have been the lowest in rank, but they were nobility nonetheless. Knights were subordinates of barons or higher nobles, and symbols of authority. I couldn't get away with not punishing the culprits. But these adventurers operated out of Seatoh Village, and many were close to Van.

This would not be an easy decision. I couldn't make the call to punish them without good reason. “Why did this clash happen in the first place?”

A deep furrow formed between the chiliarch's brows. It seemed this subject was difficult to broach.

“Answer quickly. I will not hold you responsible,” I said with a sigh.

The man cleared his throat, then spoke. “According to the knights, the container base that Lord Van built was defective. And when they said this to the adventurers in question, the adventurers attacked them.”

“What? You're telling me this is defective?” I said, looking around the base. I could detect no issues with the structure. With a frown, I explained, “Count Ventury's Chivalric Order checked this base's construction. Count Ventury personally confirmed it as soon as the adventurers put it together. If this truly is defective, then Count Ventury's order is responsible for not spotting the problem.”

The chiliarch nodded slightly. “I see. However, since there was always a chance that Your Majesty would rest in one, the responsibility also lies with Lord Van for offering defective bases in the first place. To have created such innovative temporary bases for our long march was a tremendous feat, but if he gave us faulty products...”

“He would have to be severely punished,” I said, finishing the man's thought. The chiliarch fell silent.

Now I understood his hesitance to speak. If the container bases proved unusable, morale would plummet, our march would slow to a crawl, and—if worst came to worst—we could even run out of food and supplies. Should that happen, no number of adjustments would help us. Our ability to resupply would be called into question, and we would likely be forced to cancel the march on Yelenetta.

This war cost time, money, and manpower on the part of the nobility. Mobilizing entire Chivalric Orders meant reducing the forces present in each individual territory, putting a heavy burden on every region. Whether this was caused by faulty bases or outside forces, the person responsible would need to be punished. The nobles who'd paid out of their own pockets to be here would settle for nothing less.

"We must take great care in investigating what happened. Send a messenger to summon Lord Van to us."

"Yessir!" The chiliarch straightened his back and dashed off, and I sighed.

"If someone is trying to cause problems, I must find out who they are. Multiple people will lose their heads over this," I whispered, grimacing. Then I thought about Van.

I didn't care about some worthless noblemen. But if Van, who'd only just attained peerage, were to fail on such a large stage, his prospects going forward would be decimated. At best, he could expect nearby nobility to be inhospitable toward him. The boy himself had no interest in moving up in the world, but he would find himself on the receiving end of economic attacks.

If things get too bad, he might even flee to a neighboring country.

It was either time to be a compassionate king and arbitrate a scuffle between nobles...or time to send a few heads flying to protect Van, whom I intended to make a cornerstone of our national defense in the future.

"What to do, what to do..." I whispered, gazing at the closed door before me.

Chapter 2:

I Got Summoned Anyway

I SET MY BLACK TEA OFF TO THE SIDE WITH MY pancake-like confectionaries, which were ready to be eaten at my leisure. With a chunk of iron in hand, stealing sips of tea and bites of pancake as I went, I started crafting weapons. The dwarf forge wasn't fully operational yet, so I was still the village's number one weapons manufacturer.

Oh, and by the way: this top-rated weapons manufacturer was seated at a comfortable table in a corner of the main street of the adventurers' town. I even had a large beach parasol for shade.

"Ah, Lord Van, you're done with today's order of thirty swords, ten spears, and twenty shields!"

"Wow, already? In that case, I'd like to make some machine bow modifications."

"Lord Van, you will exhaust yourself working so much. Why don't you take a dip in the bath first?"

"Oh, great idea! Can you prepare some cold fruit juice for me?"

"Absolutely!"

And so I continued crafting weapons, enjoying the company of Till and Khamsin—a common and happy sight in this village. *If only these peaceful days could last forever.*

Unfortunately, they were interrupted by an unwanted visitor. The middle-aged knight was terribly out of breath and drenched in sweat as he sat atop his steed. I felt like I'd been thrown into some mega-serious situation out of nowhere. The knight's cloak bore the emblem of the royal military, which told me that he was here for a reason.

The man huffed and puffed as he called out my name. “L-Lord Van!”

“A-are you okay? Did something happen during the march?”

I tried my best to produce a somber expression, but it was no good. I was still in “chill in the bath while sipping juice” mode. I wouldn’t be able to deal with this kind of seriousness for very long.

The middle-aged man descended from his horse and took a knee. “I apologize for interrupting your conversation! His Majesty requests that you meet him at the temporary base where he’s resting, quickly!”

“Wait, what? Like right now? I mean, I’m not ready at all. I won’t be able to leave just yet.”

This was so annoying I couldn’t help but grumble. I couldn’t say anything but “yes” to a request directly from the king, though, and the knight he’d sent to summon me looked like his eyes were about to pop out of his head.

Khamsin and Till both looked terribly concerned. If I could, I would have loved to turn down the request, but that wasn’t in the cards.

The knight said, “Um, there was some trouble that brought the march to a halt...”

“Oh, I was just kidding,” I said with a pained smile. The middle-aged knight’s shoulders sagged in relief. “I’ll get ready right away. I’ll also let the best hotel in town know that you’re coming, so you can rest there. What happened, anyway?”

“I don’t know the details, only that a group of adventurers got into a fight with some knights...”

“Huh? Please tell me it wasn’t Ortho and his crew. Scrapping with knights is just asking for trouble,” I said unthinkingly. Ortho and his party would never do something untoward to a group of knights—it had to be someone else.

“Khamsin, take this kind knight to the Kusala Hotel. Tell them I’ll pay for his lodgings later.”

“As you wish.”

I turned to Till. “Can you tell Dee and Esparda what happened here? Let’s confirm how many people will need to stay to protect the village and adventurers’ town. We’ll be traveling through a monster-filled mountain range, so I’ll have to get some war wagons ready. Food, too.”

“U-understood!” Till darted off.

This was going to be such a pain. I never thought I’d find myself on the front lines again. Sure, I wouldn’t be clashing with enemy Chivalric Orders, but I was still heading somewhere dangerous.

I just want to live in peace...

“I just want to live in peace,” I said, accidentally letting slip my true feelings while we readied supplies and assembled the Chivalric Order. Beside me, Dee tilted his head.

“What? Did you say something?”

“Oh, nothing.”

It took unusually little time for Seatoh Village’s Chivalric Order to assemble and take their formation, probably because of the frequency with which they were called to fight back monsters. While I was busy muttering, they’d gotten into place like well-trained firefighters or something.

“Lord Van, both the Seatoh Village and Esparda Chivalric Orders have assembled,” Dee announced. He turned to face our brave men and women.

Man, that was fast. Not just the prep, but the roll call, too. Our Chivalric Orders are incredible! I looked over the group and, satisfied with the sight before me, began to speak.

“Hey everyone! Do you want to go to the Wolfsbrook Mountain Range?” I asked in a joking tone. A handful of people cheered.

Not a bad reaction. The folks who cheered are getting promotions! ...Just kidding.

“We’ve got orders straight from the king! There’s been some trouble during the march! We don’t have much choice, so we’re heading out there to provide aid! Everyone, lend me your energy!”

I quoted a certain famous battle manga at the end, in an attempt to get people pumped. Fortunately, my words were met with cheers. Of course, a few people couldn’t hide their trepidation, but that was to be expected.

I’ll give them personal training when we get back, I thought before clearing my throat and raising my head.

“We’ll leave half of our forces behind to defend Seatoh Village and the adventurers’ town, and the other half will come with us to the Wolfsbrook Mountain Range! Adventurers, we’ll be counting on you guys in the vanguard! Our second and rear rows will be war wagons and infantry! The machine bow squad and cavalry will be at the center of the formation! Commander Dee is in charge of our combined forces!”

“Yessir!” Dee shouted, and the rest of the order echoed him.

I raised a hand and announced our departure, the troops sounded a war cry, and the march began.

All right, I’ve prepared as best as I can. Time to do this the safe way.

It didn’t take me long after we entered the mountains to come up with a host of complaints.

First: the uneven mountain road. It was no better than a game trail, and worse, pretty much skirting the cliff’s edge at some points. *And* it was super narrow, barely wide enough for carriages to pass through.

Our Chivalric Orders rarely needed to travel through mountain roads like this, so it couldn’t be helped. Still, the road’s pits and bumps were so perfectly

placed to damage our vehicles' wheels as to seem intentionally designed for that purpose. It felt like someone was kneeling me in the butt every time we went over them.

Van-made carriages boasted the safest, most comfortable rides in the land and promised a relaxing journey to all who rode in them, so the knee strikes to our butts were neutralized somewhat; it felt like they were being delivered through thick pillows. Still hurt, though. Enough butt strikes in a row eventually produced some significant pain.

I stoically withstood the discomfort, but after two or so hours, I realized something huge. I whispered, "Wait, is the trip home going to be like this, too?"

Till, Khamsin, and Arte treated me to pained smiles. Arte said, "It's times like this that I really appreciate our town roads."

"I can see how poor roads like these might slow down a march," said Till.

"My butt hurts," groaned Khamsin.

I nodded decisively. "All right, let's redo the roads. We'll make them big enough to fit two carriages side-by-side."

Till blinked. "Um, you mean right now?"

"A-are you sure?" Khamsin asked with a concerned frown. "Doesn't His Majesty want you there immediately?"

"The trip alone will take us two to three days," Arte agreed.

But my butt had reached its limit. "No worries! I'll make it quick. We won't lose any time at this rate!" I stood up and poked my head out of the carriage. "Stop the march!"

Just like that, the Chivalric Order came to a halt. I sensed their apprehension, but the speed with which they followed my orders made me proud. It was incredible to think that most of them had just been normal villagers or hunters before this. I nodded at them, deeply moved by the sight.

Dee came to investigate the reason for the stoppage, clearly on his guard.

“What is it, Lord Van?”

I stepped down from the carriage. “The roads are so bad that I’ve decided to remake them. Right now.”

“Truly?” Dee looked shocked. Till and the others peeked out of the carriage, looking concerned.

“Don’t worry! I’ll be quick so we’re not late,” I assured him. “Could you and the others split into groups and cut down the trees on both sides of the road?”

“Mhm! I’m not sure what’s going on, but as you wish! We’re on it!”

“Thanks. Start with the trees over by the vanguard. Anyone who’s not cutting down trees should stay on guard.”

“Understood! I am on my way!”

I watched Dee run off to do as I asked, then turned my gaze on Khamsin. “You’re coming with me, Khamsin. Till, Arte, you two wait in the carriage, okay? Sorry, Arte, but I might need to borrow your puppets later.”

“As you wish!” said Arte, meeting my eyes. She was much more confident in her abilities these days.

“Leave it to me!” said Till, just as earnestly.

I couldn’t help but smile at them. Then I made my way to the vanguard, peppered with questions as I went.

“Lord Van, what are you plotting?”

“Did something happen?”

Every time someone asked me questions like these, I told them I was building a road. People seemed confused by my nonchalance, but by the time I hit the vanguard, I found that everyone was already cutting down trees. This made sense—back when we first started the Chivalric Order, Dee and Esparda had recruited a bunch of lumberjacks and stone cutters. Those tough-looking men were now chopping down trees and lining them up along the sides of the road.

“How’s this, Lord Van? Does this look all right?” Dee was suddenly shirtless, chopping a tree down with his broad sword. I hadn’t made that weapon for attacking trees, but I imagined that it made the process pretty easy. Of course, not everyone had equipment well-suited to this particular activity.

I checked things over, then gathered the materials necessary to fix the problem. “I have no issues with how you guys are going about this, but you need the right equipment. Everyone, lend me your shields.”

“Y-yessir!”

Hastily, the nearby knights set their shields on the ground. Most had Van-made weapons and armor, but some of the shields were made by the order while others were ready-made models from the Bell & Rango Company. Our order was growing too quickly for me to supply everyone with my equipment.

“High quality stuff,” I murmured, “but I’ll make them even better later.”

I began transforming the shields into sharp, uniquely balanced axes with their center of gravity near the top. These tools were meant for cutting down stationary trees, so I had to make them powerful and easy to swing. They also needed to be tough, wide enough to chop down a tree, and, of course, aesthetically pleasing, like all Van-made weapons.

After I prepared twenty axes, I paused and said, “I think I went a little overboard.”

Khamsin was giving me a round of applause but Dee, approaching, had his brow furrowed. “Hmm,” he said. “Wonderful work. However, they look a bit... sinister.”

“They are kind of terrifying,” Khamsin agreed a bit awkwardly.

It was true the new axes looked like something a minotaur might wield...but they weren’t *that* scary.

Dee picked up one of the axes and smiled. “Ooh, it’s lighter than it looks.” He swung it around in his hand.

“Huh?” said Khamsin. “Really?”

Dee turned the axe toward a tree. Sensing his intention, the people around us stopped to watch.

“Harumph!” The axe sliced through the air and the bark of a tree.

All the way through the tree, actually. Dee’s single slash cut wood as easily as air. After a moment of stillness, the tree slid off its trunk and collapsed to the ground. Even from a distance, I could see how clean the cut was.

“Wonderful sharpness!” Dee proclaimed. “But my broad sword is still easier to use!”

“No, no, no. You’re on a completely different level!” I explained. “You could take people down with a log! For you, the weapon doesn’t even matter.”

Dee simply slung the axe over his shoulder and boomed a laugh. He wasn’t listening to a word I said.

Fortunately, upon further testing, the axes proved perfectly effective. The rest of the knights were able to cut down trees in two to three swings. I made sure to praise them, for it was their hard work that enabled me to get started on the road itself.

Aqueducts, electricity, gas, internet, telephones, and roads: these formed the infrastructure of any major city. Imagine if a city’s aqueducts stopped working and there was no potable water for a year. People would still be able to filter water from rivers and lakes, then boil it for drinking purposes...but that would severely impact their daily life and work.

Roads were similar. Even a high-speed car was useless if the roads it drove on were no good. The economy would grind to a halt if people couldn’t move from place to place or transport supplies. You’d lose out on all those valuable human resources. The same principle applied in a world without automobiles.

And while these noble excuses were all grounded in reality, the truth was that

it all came down to one thing: my butt hurt.

“Here I go!”

“Good luck!”

I turned tree after tree into wood blocks. Not the usual brick-like shapes, though—this time, I was making flat panels. I lined them up on the ground like I was spreading out concrete. It might’ve been more accurate to describe the process as flattening out the uneven road with a layer of wood that molded itself to the terrain. The panels were made from a fusion of rock and timber; as long as they didn’t break, they’d never slip out of place.

At this point, I could make the things with my eyes closed. So unless I ran out of materials, I could make one meter of road per second.

“Whoa!”

“We can’t let Lord Van outpace us!”

“Cut, cut, cut, cut!”

As I converted timber into wood blocks and constructed the road, I saw the knights cutting down trees ahead of me, bellowing to one another. At some point, it turned into a kind of race. *I won’t lose!* I thought, increasing my speed.

Thanks to our little competition, we lost track of time and spent three straight hours paving the road. “I-I think we need to take a break for dinner!” I said, giving up at last.

The knights who were chopping trees collapsed to the ground in exhaustion. We were all beat.

Just then, the ground shook as another tree collapsed.

“Huh?” Everyone else was completely out of gas, but Dee was checking the position of the sun, looking puzzled. “Is it already that time? The sun is still up.”

How is this dude so full of energy?

I was still glaring at him from my seat atop the carriage when Till came over.

“Lord Van, look over there!”

I followed her eyes and saw a series of Van-made container bases lined up by the road. “Oooh, perfect timing!”



“Indeed!”

We exchanged high fives and I ran off toward the containers, suddenly feeling like I’d never been exhausted at all.

“Wow, they’re so well-done!” I exclaimed, patting the walls and door. I was short, so these things felt huge to me. I’d also made them tough: a perfect rest stop for the king.

“What wonderful structures,” Till agreed with a smile.

Khamsin, coming up behind us, said with a smile of his own, “Maybe the march came to a stop because people were fighting over them?”

“Oh, that makes sense. Can’t blame them for that, to be honest.” We smiled at each other.

Arb and Lowe came over with Arte in tow. “Are we making camp here?”

“Good question. If we are, we should construct two more container bases so everyone can rest. That way, with people taking turns, nobody will go without sleep,” I answered.

Arb and Lowe each placed a hand on their chest. “Yessir! We will construct the bases immediately!”

They exchanged excited words with one another, then turned to the rest of the knights. Arb said, “First Squad! We’re not losing to Lowe’s Second Squad! We’re going to put the container together faster than them!”

“Second Squad!” said Lowe. “It’s time to show off the results of your daily training! Let’s do this!”

Having received orders from their superiors, the knights responded energetically and got right to work. Based on the ease with which they accepted the instructions, I was guessing they’d been having these little competitions all along.

Either because of the sheer number of people at work or because they were

all fired up, the bases were done before I could so much as blink.

“Here you go, Lord Van! Please relax in Base Arb!”

“No, no, no,” protested Lowe, “this base is way more comfortable!”

They began to squabble in front of their respective container bases. I gave them a pained smile and pointed at the container on top of one of the carriages.

“I’ll make my choice later. Let’s build a few more of these. We need to make sure we have room for enough people to rest at the same time, so that swapping folks in and out is viable.”

That was all Arb and Lowe needed to begin their base-building competition all over again.

On the third day, we finally caught up with the rear end of the royal march. We were moving in a fairly small group, so I thought we’d get there quickly, but the Royal Chivalric Order had covered more distance than I expected.

The Chivalric Orders in the rear must’ve belonged to nobles I didn’t have much contact with, as they were all surprised by our equipment. “Oooh, Baron Van’s Chivalric Order!”

“What fascinating carriages.”

“Hello,” I said, greeting people as I passed them, “how are you all doing?”

I was making my way on foot toward the center of the formation when I spotted Panamera’s Chivalric Order. Some of the knights I’d met before noticed me and came over to say hello.

“Long time no see!” I said. “Is Panamera around?”

“Sir! After the march stopped, she went to meet His Majesty!”

“Got it! Thanks a lot!” I offered the man my gratitude and kept walking, passing through all the smiling soldiers.

I kept on like this, exchanging pleasantries with all the soldiers around me. I fully expected them to fall in love with my charming persona.

I should prepare some Van-made souvenirs in Seatoh Village for later. Make them real easy to buy. I'm sure they'll be a huge hit. "Li'l Van Steamed Buns, Li'l Van Fried Dough, Li'l Van Madeleine... What else?"

Till raised her hand, interrupting my serious contemplation of which kinds of souvenirs would sell best. "Um, I think bags would be wonderful! You could sell leather bags with your beautiful smile on them!"

For some reason, Arte raised her hand next. "U-um, I think accessories like rings and necklaces would be nice."

"Hmm... Well, I'm not going to print my smiling face on any bags, but those are great ideas, ladies."

Khamsin folded his arms and groaned. This was all starting to feel like one of those quiz shows where you had to be the first one to hit the button. "W-we already sell weapons and armor..."

Seeing Khamsin wrack his brain for souvenir ideas, I couldn't help but smile. Before I knew it, a familiar crest came into view on one of the banners up ahead.

That's the royal family's crest, right?

"Have we caught up with the Royal Chivalric Order? That didn't take so long after all."

As I weaved through the cluster of soldiers, I carefully examined the situation around me. Eventually, I saw some of the container bases I'd given His Majesty lined up on the side of the road. In front of the central base stood a group of men. The royal guard, in fact.

"Is that the one? Hi everyone! I'm Van Nei Fertio, hailing from Seatoh Village!"

The group turned as one to face me, summoned by my energetic greeting.

“Ah, Baron Van!” said one knight. “Thank you for coming all this way. You arrived much sooner than we anticipated.”

“Well, that’s thanks to the road-paving work we did! We really gave it our all!”

“Hmm? I apologize, but I do not quite understand what you are saying. Please wait a moment while I inform His Majesty of your arrival.” The knight saluted me and entered the base to deliver his report.

Darn, I wanted to give him the details on the road work we did, but I suppose I’ll just have the king and the others see the real thing when they come back. We did a ton of paving in a tiny span of time. Fast, tough, careful... I’m really excited to brag to everyone about the Van Construction Company’s road-paving skills.

Bouncing those pointless thoughts around my head, I watched people begin to shuffle out of the container base. The first one out was Panamera, her attention-grabbing blonde hair waving in the wind.

“Oooh, boy!”

She was clad in light armor that showed off her amazing figure. *Impressive as always.*

Next came Ferdinatto and Ventury, then finally the king and my old man. I was a bit perplexed as to why my old man refused to look in my direction, but I turned toward the king nonetheless and took a knee, lowering my head in formal greeting. “I apologize for my late arrival, Your Majesty.”

The king raised both his hands and responded, in a tone of wonder, “Well done! Normally I would not summon you here for something so insignificant as a scuffle, but this whole matter has been a bit drawn out. I imagine that once we investigate what happened, we will reach a swift conclusion. Might I have your assistance?”

“Absolutely, Your Majesty.” The king had avoided stating what he actually wanted assistance with, so I politely asked him for more details. “What would

you like me to look into?”

I really don't care what I have to do. I just want to wrap this up and go home, I thought, but the king groaned, looking pained.

“Unfortunately, there has been some trouble between one of the Chivalric Orders and a party of adventurers. The cause is a defect in the container bases you developed.”

“...Pardon?” I was nearly speechless. This was the reason the march had come to a halt?

Impossible. It's true that I rushed them into development because I had no time, but I didn't cut any corners. They should be higher quality than any other industrial goods you could get your hands on...

I racked my brain and came up empty. It would be one thing if there'd been a problem with something *outside* the container—but if the base itself was faulty, this would be bad.

“I'd like to investigate the issue immediately,” I said, bowing my head low. “Um, could I see the container in question?”

Chapter 3:

Responding to Claims

ONE OF THE WOOD BLOCK CONTAINER BASES I MADE had allegedly collapsed on itself. I could only come up with a handful of reasons that might happen.

The first one was simple: a defect in the product. If that was the case, all I could do was apologize. The second was a mistake made when constructing the container itself. I had a hard time believing this had happened, because my adventurers would never cut corners in their work. They knew how important this was.

The final potential cause was that the base itself had been dismantled from within. That would require two or more individuals to lift the ceiling from the inside. In other words, they would have to be deliberately trying to dismantle the structure.

The only realistic options were the first and the third, and both of them were bad news. In the first case, I'd lose the faith people had in me and my creations. It would deal a massive blow to the value of Seatoh Village's local goods. The third option meant an antagonist was trying to take me down, and by process of elimination, it would have to be another noble.

Weird. How could anyone view my cute li'l self as a threat? I thought. But then someone came to mind. *Jalpa.*

It was possible that some nearby nobleman was jealous of my exploits and trying to bring me down a notch, but the man who would be the happiest to see me fail was Jalpa. He would never use his Chivalric Order to directly interfere with my business, though, so it was probably wise to assume some other noble was also involved.

"This might be a big problem..." I said to myself.

The whole scenario sounded exasperatingly plausible. I had the king return to

his container while I waited inside a carriage for the party of adventurers. Till and Arte were with me, so nobody else could hear my comments.

“Lord Van! Sir Ortho has arrived!” Khamsin yelled.

I looked outside and saw Ortho and his people walking toward us in a line, off to the side of the knights.

“Hey!” I waved to them, and they smiled and waved back.

“Lord Van!”

They picked up their pace after they saw me, so I hopped out of the carriage to greet them. Ortho, Pluriel, and Kusala were all present, making for a total of ten adventurers.

“I heard what happened! One of my bases collapsed? I’m sorry, you guys. I know you worked hard to put it together.”

This was my responsibility. These men and women were cooperating with me, and I had put them in a rough situation. But the adventurers started to panic.

“N-no, please don’t apologize! This isn’t your fault!”

“It’s totally not!”

“Not a single one of us thinks there are any issues with your containers!”

Each of the adventurers offered their reassurance. I found myself immensely grateful.

“Thanks, you guys. That means a lot to me. In that case, why do you think the container collapsed? These things should be pretty tough.”

Ortho glowered. He was angrier than I’d ever seen him. “Someone intentionally broke it. Though I don’t know who...”

Another adventurer cut in. “And listen to this! They said the container collapsed on its own, but none of the parts are broken! We went out of our way to reconstruct it, and it’s still standing even now!”

“Yeah!” said one of his comrades. “If it collapsed on its own, then something

would be broken, right?! But since they've never built one themselves, they probably have no clue how telling it is that nothing's broken!"

The angry adventurers kept chiming in to agree with Ortho, adding their own complaints to the mix. I understood where they were coming from, but this wasn't the place to voice their rage. Complaining right next to where the king was resting meant their words would reach the ears of important nobility.

If we pointed a finger at the wrong person, the results would be devastating.

"E-everyone, I get it, please lower your voices," I said, gesturing for them to quiet down.

But it was too late. "What is the meaning of this?"

I turned around to find Jalpa, Ventury, and two other nobles standing behind me. There was no way we were going to worm our way out of this.

"Did I mishear you?" Ventury continued. "It sounded to me like some lowly adventurers were criticizing us." He folded his arms, glaring.

I couldn't afford to let myself be hostile. Etiquette dictated that one should kneel and act docile and compliant when faced with a higher-ranking noble, but everyone's pride was preventing them from doing so. All they could do was stand in silence. This made Ventury even angrier.

"You fools! It is your fault the march has halted, and yet you dare take this attitude with me?!" His face was filled with rage as he screamed at Ortho and the others, who finally lowered themselves. It looked like they were forcing themselves to obey, though I quickly realized that not a single one of them were actually kneeling.

For my part, I observed the interaction, finding Ventury's attitude rather curious. He'd claimed it was "their fault," meaning he felt the problem resided with the adventurers. If that was the case, then Ventury wasn't the nobleman trying to screw me over. He was close to Jalpa, so I'd thought it possible they were working together, but I was wrong.

“Count Ventury, I apologize for the trouble that my containers have caused you. I am deeply sorry for delaying our invasion,” I said, taking a knee and lowering my head. Before I did anything else, I had to draw his attention away from the adventurers.

To my own surprise, my move was super effective. Ventury folded his arms and sighed deeply. “...It is fine. Raise your head. Quite frankly, both His Majesty and I trust your creations. I believe the container collapsed for other reasons.”

“Oooh, really?!” I raised my head, thrilled by this twist.

Ventury snorted and looked past me. “If we did not, he would not at this moment be resting in one of those containers.”

“Right, that makes sense!” I nodded, satisfied with his answer. *That really does make total sense.*

Count Ferdinatto and Viscount Panamera, two major nobles within the royal army, were my allies. All told, this situation wasn’t quite as dire as I’d initially thought. If I could get Count Ventury on my side, I’d be able to find the true culprit right away, especially now that I’d cut down my list of potential suspects significantly.

But then I thought things over again. At this rate, our invasion of Yelenetta would be seriously delayed. While there weren’t *that* many nobles who held important positions in the army, there were, quite frankly, an insane number of soldiers present. Finding two or three culprits in a group that large would take at least two full days of searching. On top of that, we’d need proof to get them to fess up. Without proof, it would take even longer.

In which case...

I looked up at Ventury and Jalpa. “Thank you very much. I would like to make up for things by significantly increasing the speed of the march.”

They looked at me with identical wide-eyed stares.

“Trees! Cut down more trees!”

“Carry ’em over!”

“Keep your guard up for monsters! Don’t let ’em get in the way!”

“Hey, you! Cut those weeds more carefully!”

Surrounded by knights yelling to one another, I diligently laid wood block panels down on the road.

Thanks to the increase in manpower, I could pave the road even quicker than I’d done when I was making my way toward the royal march. The speed at which I was receiving timber outpaced the speed of the carriages, so I laid down softened blocks and hardened them along the road. The new road was being constructed at such a fast rate that the soldiers cutting down the trees were the ones who had to take breaks and swap in and out.

Half a day passed in the blink of an eye, so we took a break to eat. In terms of timing, this was probably it for the day. With that in mind, I accepted a cold drink from Till and was sipping it when His Majesty appeared with Panamera.

“Oho! To think you would complete this much road in such a short span of time!” the king said, impressed by our work.

The soldiers who were resting, covered in sweat, quickly knelt on the ground and lowered their heads. Needless to say, Till and I did the same.

“Baron Van, raise your head.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.” I looked up.

The king wore an expression of tremendous delight. He raised both arms and looked around at the wood block road. “Incredible! I thought I knew how useful your magic could be, but I was clearly wrong! Never did I think it possible to lay down a road as quickly as a carriage could travel. Depending on your stores of magic energy, we may be able to take down fortresses we could never tackle before! After all, we’ll be able to march easily through any forest, mountain, or river! This will change the face of war!”

The soldiers nearby took in the king's excited words with looks of surprise on their faces. Panamera nodded and said, "It is as you say, Your Majesty. I would also add that we have the adventurers' hard work to thank for our safe travels through these perilous mountains. The knights do not have the ability to locate monsters before we encounter them. It would be wise to have our Chivalric Orders learn that excellent skill from the adventurers."

The king hummed in agreement. "The adventurers, you say? They are far more capable than I ever imagined! There might have been a little trouble on the road, but I will not forget their impressive accomplishments."

I was grateful for his praise of the adventurers, but his words also suggested that he had yet to settle on a culprit for this whole container base issue. *I suppose I should be grateful that he's being fair and not siding with the nobility by default*, I thought, though I still didn't feel great about the whole thing.

"I can't let myself think about this too much. I'm going to rest for today and switch gears," I whispered. But the king had sharp ears.

"Oh?" he asked. "Hmm, yes, you have used quite a lot of magic since you arrived. I'm sure you've hit your limit. Rest well before tomorrow comes."

I nodded, sure that my face was betraying my relief. I was just glad not to be told to work myself to death. "Yes, Your Majesty. In that case, I might as well make a base where everyone can rest. Khamsin, can you bring me the remaining timber?"

"Right away!"

I started preparing, even as the king blinked at me. He whispered, "You mean to tell me you still have enough magical energy to build more containers?"

I couldn't help but smirk. *You're in for a surprise, Your Majesty!*

"Lord Van, I've brought the wood!"

"Nice! There's lots left, huh?" I looked over at the pile of timber off to the side of the completed road and smiled, then checked the slope of the mountain and

the road ahead. As luck would have it, it was a gentle slope, and the road was relatively wide. Already creating a design in my head, I said to myself, "Cool. Okay, I'm going to make a base for everyone from the rank of officer upward to rest in."

Something like the resting area I'd built near the dungeon would be good. Since I was dealing with high-ranking soldiers and the like, I decided to go all out and make the building super tall so that you could see everything in the area. A long and narrow structure would make people anxious, so I figured I'd increase the size of each individual room and lower the total number of walls.

With that in mind, I placed a hand on the pile of timber and began to pour my magical energy into the materials. I intended to construct a building shaped like a pyramid that would run along the side of the mountain itself. Since we were already deep in the mountains, I also needed to make the walls strong enough to prevent nearby monsters from smashing through and ensure they weren't textured in a way that would allow creatures to climb them.

The whole thing ended up looking like something out of an old science fiction film. It was massive, and kind of resembled a pyramid partially buried in the ground. Its interior was pretty roughly partitioned, not nearly as elaborate as I would have liked. I decided I would redo it all at some point in the future.

"All right!" I said finally. "Your Majesty, let's rest here for today. I created a single large door on the surface, but there are no other entrance points, so you can rest easy."

When I turned around, though, the king was simply staring up at the structure, wide-eyed and slack-jawed.

Panamera folded her arms and looked down at me. "Boy, you went too far."

Because I'd used timber from all the many trees growing along the slope, the base was enormous. Upon opening the large double doors, you were met with a set of stairs wide enough for four individuals to walk side by side. One room

was set off to the left side and another to the right, both surprisingly spacious. Of course, because I'd designed it like a pyramid, the rooms got smaller the higher up you went.

"Your Majesty, these rooms are big enough to fit fifty people each, for a total of one hundred. The rooms get smaller as you go higher, but all in all there should be space for at least three hundred people to rest. If it isn't too much trouble, please take the room at the very top of the building."

The king looked up at the long set of stairs and blinked. Then he turned to me, wearing an expression that was difficult to describe. "It took you almost no time to build this structure. Are you telling me you can make something like this anywhere? Wait, let me rephrase that. I know now that you could construct something like this on a mountain slope or in the woods, but would you be able to do the same sort of work on a cliff or above a river?"

"I think it would depend on how much timber was available and on the geography of the land. For example, if I were to construct this hanging off the side of a cliff, I would need natural protrusions in the rock to affix it to. To construct it in a river, the water would need to be shallow enough. If it was too deep, even I would struggle."

The king folded his arms and groaned. In a quiet, serious voice, he said, "So as long as those problems are not present, you are confident in your ability to build such a structure? This is...something else..."

Panamera slipped behind him and pulled my hand. She led me into one of the large empty rooms, then drew her face super close to mine.

"Boy," she whispered, "you are obviously a genius, but you've done something stupid this time. Why would you reveal these kinds of magical skills in front of His Majesty when he's aiming to expand his territory? Do you understand how much of an advantage it would give us to be able to build fortresses right at our enemies' throats? And thanks to your abilities, in any kind of environment, to boot? This is something His Majesty would kill for."

Panamera was as kind as she was strong-willed. She could have used me to increase her own standing, but here she was, offering me advice.

“Don’t worry,” I said. “Look at it this way: if he really thinks my skills are that useful, then he won’t do anything that will upset or hurt me.”

By saying this, I implied that His Majesty would have a problem were I to defect to an enemy nation. If he was intent on expanding his territory, then making an enemy of someone who could quickly construct fortifications like this would be bad news for him. I had worked out a way to get him to humor me without actually fulfilling his requests.

Unlike Panamera, who worked steadily to climb the ranks, I was trying *not* to live up to His Majesty’s expectations. I had no desire to work my way up in the world. My only ambition was to live in peace and enjoy my life. Since Panamera had a completely different worldview, I didn’t expect her to understand where I was coming from.

I raised my head to find Panamera smirking and shrugging. “I see. So by showing off your abilities, you are making a statement about your importance. A move like that requires a lot of courage, boy. His Majesty is a wise man, so I imagine the tactic will be effective, but if you were to try something like this with a less capable sovereign, they would brand you a traitor. You understand this, yes?”

I was humbled. I could sense from her expression and her careful choice of words that she was warning me—in other words, she thought I’d gone too far.

Honestly, I was confident in my ability to use my ballistae for cover if I ever needed to successfully defect, but I also didn’t want to betray Panamera’s goodwill. I lowered my head. “I understand. I will be careful going forward.”

That was when the king entered the room, smiling meaningfully. “Are you finished?”

“Um, did you happen to overhear our conversation?” I asked, tilting my head with a smile.

His Majesty chuckled. “No, not at all...is what I shall say for now. Ha ha ha! I swear, you are a brave child, if nothing else.” He flashed us a smile before walking up the stairs ahead of us.

He was choosing to ignore my comments. Comments that could have been construed as belittling the sovereign of this nation. *This guy really is big-hearted.*

“Looks like things will be okay,” I said, turning back to Panamera.

She wore an exasperated look on her face. “You may not be an elemental mage, but I imagine you will contribute more than enough to the war effort.”

“Ha ha ha. I’m glad I’m not an elemental mage, or I’d have to head to the front lines! All right then, I’ll be resting outside if you need me.” I started for the building’s entrance and Panamera blinked in surprise.

“Are you really choosing to be modest now? Your standards are a mystery to me. You made this place yourself, so why not rest in one of the rooms?”

“Ah, well, I plan to make my own base. After all, it’s still bright outside.”

King Dino

THANKS TO VAN, I’D BEEN ABLE TO SETTLE DOWN FOR the day in an environment that should have been unimaginable during a military march through the mountains. The container bases he’d constructed were already impressive, but this new structure was immense. I was able to rest easy. After all, I had my own private room. Compared to the tent I would normally be forced to sleep in, this was a luxury beyond comparison.

There were even small holes to the right and left that allowed fresh air into the room, which was furnished with a chair and a table. The boy had really flexed his skills. More than satisfied, I exited the room and spoke to one of the guards at the door.

“I was thinking of going outside for a bit. Do you know which room Baron Van is staying in?”

“Sir! The baron appears to be resting outside!”

“What?”

I was so surprised I unintentionally raised my voice. Sensing I might be displeased, my guard straightened his back and corrected his posture. I wasn't actually upset, however, simply surprised. I'd assumed Van was staying in the same building.

“Do not tell me he left because of his peerage?” I whispered, bringing a hand to my chin. It was true that barons were the lowest-ranking nobles other than lord knights, but since it was he who made this building in the first place, he had more right to stay here than anyone.

I sighed, descending the staircase and exiting the building. I had gone to bed fairly early and therefore woken early too. The sun had only just begun to rise.

“Y-Your Majesty!”

As I exited, some of the knights who were camping out nearby looked at me in surprise and shot to attention. I raised a hand, greeting them, then noticed something was off.

“Well, this is unexpected...” I whispered, my attention stolen by the sight around me.

There were numerous two-story bases in the area. Most of the soldiers were still camping outside, but there appeared to be enough facilities for around two thousand men. It looked like an inn town had sprouted from the ground overnight.

I turned to one of the nearby knights. “Was this built this morning?”

I had my doubts, and sure enough, the knight shook his head. I felt I had a decent understanding of Van's personality at this point, hence why I'd been sure he wouldn't wake before sunrise just to build lodgings for the soldiers. But

did that mean he had this much energy left over yesterday?

“B-Baron Van built these before dinner last night, so, um, the Chivalric Orders talked things over and decided to split into three groups to take turns resting.”

“That is fine. I am not upset that any of you are using these facilities,” I said, paying little mind to the man’s explanation. Then I looked around again.

If we had bases like these set up along the entirety of the mountain road, we could store materials, supplies, and all manner of equipment. The length of time we’d be able to spend on a campaign would see a significant increase, and supplying our troops would become logistically easier and far more secure. The question was: how many people would recognize the potential this held?

“I see now why Viscount Panamera forged an alliance with him,” I said under my breath. “She is as wise as ever.”

The boy’s effective magical range and consistency. The stores of magical energy he possessed. Just how far did his abilities go, and how much magic could he use continuously? He’d spent nearly half the previous day building roads, but still had enough energy to build all of this. It seemed plausible that he could build a castle at the very heart of enemy territory in a single night.

I would need to investigate the extent of Van’s abilities and rethink my entire understanding of magic if I hoped to use them properly. Were this the dwarf nation, Van’s magic would be used entirely for the purpose of smithing. That would be a horrid waste of his limitless potential.

“I will have to dispatch military researchers to Seatoh Village,” I muttered, even though I was outside. “If I have at least ten or so men there, they can put their minds together to produce something profitable for the kingdom. Hmm, and the boy’s tendency to shut himself in at home is unfortunate. He could be working on new roads, flood control, fortresses, weapon development... There is so much work to be done.”

I heard light steps approaching from behind me then. I quickly shut my mouth and turned around.

“You are up early, Baron Van.”

The boy looked at me, wide-eyed. He had his friends in tow. “G-good morning, Your Majesty,” he said. “I was going to say hello first, but you noticed me before I could!”

“Heh, you forget that the battlefield has long been my primary place of work. That said, I am pleased to have finally been able to get one over on you.” I smiled and looked down at the boy, who grinned and nodded.

“Yes, well, I am sorry for my late report. I also apologize for building more structures without your permission. Just to be safe, I left the road alone and prioritized making the bases sturdy and easy to use. I imagine they’ll be useful for a good long while.”

I nodded my head as a matter of course. “The Wolfsbrook Mountain Range was long believed unfit for military campaigns. How could I possibly complain about now having sufficient lodgings here? Though now that I have a strong grasp of your magical capacity, I think I would like to have you build fortresses at strategic points along the road,” I said, gazing into Van’s eyes.

How would he respond? Would he choose to serve my kingdom’s needs, or did he have something else in mind? My words were carefully chosen to discern this.

Van smiled awkwardly and rubbed the back of his head, nodding slightly. “Of course. I’ll prepare a number of rest spots and defensive fortifications on the way to Yelenetta’s border,” he said, agreeing to a demand that would be entirely unreasonable to make of anyone else. “However, as I have said before, I will not participate in combat. I’ll run if I have to, okay? That is all I ask of you, Your Majesty.”

He even managed to mix some humor into his response. Not even ten years old and the boy was a genuine genius. There was no way he didn’t understand the power I possessed as the king.

In other words, he was testing me just as I tested him.

Fascinating.

Once again, I found myself deeply interested in the child known as Van.

Chapter 4:

When I Participated in the March...

AT HIS MAJESTY'S ORDERS, I CONTINUED TO SERVICE the roads and periodically build bases along them. As the march proceeded, I was asked to make a locking system for the bases, so I put together a simple internal one. Three days passed in this manner, and I found myself outpacing the march through the mountains.

"Wait a second... Wasn't there something about one of my container bases collapsing?" I asked, turning around.

Till, sitting in the driver's seat, blinked. "Oh, right. The only thing I ever hear about now is how well the march is going thanks to your efforts. Perhaps it was all just a misunderstanding?"

Khamsin, who was walking next to the carriage, nodded. "Exactly! There's no way there were defects in something you made, Lord Van. Anybody could see that was a lie."

I responded to Khamsin's blind faith in my skills with a pained smile. "No, it's not out of the realm of possibility that I messed up during the design process. It's too early to say, one way or the other."

Arte poked her head out of the carriage window. "Lord Van, Murcia has arrived from the rear."

"Big brother?"

Surprised, I halted my road work and turned around to find Murcia out of breath and wiping the sweat from his forehead. He was leading a group of knights down the freshly paved road toward us. Oh, and just for the record, Arte looked adorable poking her head out of the window like that.

"Lord Murcia." Arte, Till, and Khamsin all bowed their heads and greeted my older brother, who raised a hand in response. Then he turned to face Arte,

greeting her directly.

“Lady Arte, it is wonderful to see you again.”

I could hardly describe his warm smile and words as appropriate for a nobleman, but Arte seemed relieved as she returned his kindness. After they had exchanged a few words, Murcia quickly directed his attention toward me.

“Van, is everything okay?”

“Hmm?” I couldn’t help but tilt my head, confused at the first words out of his mouth. “Where’s this coming from?”

Perhaps he realized how abrupt his words were, because he nodded gently and corrected himself. “Sorry, I should have greeted you first.”

“No, no. It’s fine. What’s up?” I asked him again.

Murcia stared at my face, wearing a serious expression of his own. “I was worried you were pushing yourself too hard. You guys are making such speedy progress on the road that it got me a bit concerned. Though, if anything,” he added with a smirk, “now that I’m here, I’m surprised by how normal you’re acting.”

How unfortunate. It made me sad to think he might assume I was doing fine just because I *looked* that way. For the record, I was *extremely* dissatisfied.

“I’m exhausted, actually. I’ve been paving roads and building bases in between meals. An hour of hard work, then grabbing a meal, eating a snack... It’s all good because the food is delicious, but I’d really like to rest for at least half a day,” I grumbled.

Murcia gave me an exasperated look. “I was worried you might collapse from magic overuse, but it seems that won’t be a problem. I’m glad you’re doing better than I expected.”

Why had Murcia ignored my complaints? I tried frowning at him, but he simply smiled and drew his face close to mine.

“I’m sure you’ve noticed this,” he said in a low, warning tone, “but there are

people who are jealous of you because of the way His Majesty favors you. Our father is one of them.”

Murcia was going out of his way to tell me something that would land him in hot water should Jalpa find out. I smiled. *I swear, could my brother be any kinder?*

“Don’t worry,” I reassured him. “I have the Seatoh Village Chivalric Order to protect me, and Dee is keeping tabs on the other orders from the rear. No one will be able to lay a hand on me. I’m spending my nights in a super-tough base I made myself, so there should be no issues there, either.”

We were marching to war with a neighboring country. With me as the infrastructure lynchpin, nobody could afford to cause me problems. His Majesty wouldn’t sit by and watch in silence if they did. I didn’t say that bit out loud, but it was implied in my response.

Murcia nodded. “Right. You’ll be fine as long as you’re careful. Besides, Lady Panamera has confirmed in the rear that there is nothing wrong with the bases, so I think it’s unlikely anything will happen on that front going forward.”

“Really? Thank you for all your concern.” Given Murcia’s personality, he’d probably also confirmed for himself that the bases hadn’t been messed with. My words of gratitude were earnest and genuine. After all, the knights protecting Murcia all belonged to Jalpa. Talking to me like this could worsen his position considerably.

Though I suppose His Majesty has already had some words with Jalpa and Murcia about their respective futures. Maybe I don’t need to worry much on that front...but nothing is set in stone, though. I should play it safe.

“This really is tough on the both of us, huh?” I whispered with a pained grin. Murcia blinked a few times and then burst out laughing.

On the fifth day, there was a change in our march through the mountains,

cliffs, and rivers of the Wolfsbrook Mountain Range. Suddenly, we could see more of the sky. In other words, the mountains were a lot smaller than the ones we'd already marched through.

The further into the Wolfsbrook Mountain Range you went, the taller the mountains were. The environment grew harsher, and the monsters stronger. Cutting right through the mountains was said to be impossible, but it turned out that it was possible to sneak by along the edge. It was safe to assume that we were close to leaving the Wolfsbrook Mountain Range behind.

"Think we can make it out by tomorrow if we really put our minds to it?" I whispered that night inside one of my new bases.

Khamsin nodded decisively. "Yes. I imagine we shall arrive at our destination within a day or two. This is all thanks to your hard work, Lord Van."

"Ha ha ha. Well, I gave it my all." I grimaced. "To be fair, though, this all started because I got tired of my butt hurting."

Till came over from the girls' room I had set up next door. "Oh, Lord Van? Are you still awake? You should hurry to bed. You must be exhausted!"

She was wearing the sleepwear I'd made for her: a long, one-piece gown with a silky texture to it that I'd worked hard to replicate. Not to toot my own horn or anything. Shortly thereafter, Arte appeared from behind Till in the same gown, looking adorable as always.

"Yeah, you're right," I said. "But you two need to hurry to bed as well. If you need any bedding, let me know."

Arte gave me a big smile. "Thank you very much."

"Fear not!" said Till, smiling. "We have beds. We might be too comfortable, if anything!"

I'd created the beds on the fly, so they weren't actually all that comfortable. The bedding and pillows were made from monster hide, so they were pretty cozy, at least, but the whole assemblage was kind of iffy overall.

Hoping to give them peace of mind, I said, “I’m sorry, ladies. When we get back to Seatoh Village, we’ll have all the comfy beds we could want. We just have to suffer through this a little longer.”

Till and Arte simply exchanged glances and giggled. Arte said, “These beds are plenty nice.”

“If anything, I would argue that the beds in Seatoh Village are too nice,” Till said. “His Majesty must be stunned right now.”

“Huh? Really?” I was genuinely surprised by their responses. I wasn’t particular about the materials I used, so the beds in Seatoh Village were more like cheap sofas—but according to these two, that wasn’t a problem at all.

I’d been so focused on creating clothing and shelter of late. Maybe my standards had gotten too high without my noticing it.

“That reminds me,” I whispered, recalling what felt like the distant past. “It’s crazy to think we started with straw beds. Brings me back.”

Khamsin nodded. “Indeed. I was shocked by how ramshackle the village looked at first, but you went and fixed it up in no time. At this point, it might be even nicer than the royal capital,” he added, looking proud.

“Ha ha ha. You’re going to get yourself punished for *lèse-majesté*, Khamsin.” His Majesty and the other nobles were resting in bases nearby, and here this boy was criticizing the royal capital. I was sincerely impressed by his bravery... but seeing him blanch at my words of warning, I retracted that thought.

We chatted among ourselves for a while, then headed back to our respective bedrooms for the night.

I worked really hard on construction today. Good job, Li’l Van! I thought, closing my eyes.

I woke up to someone shaking me. “Hrm... What?” I mumbled half-heartedly, turning my head to the side.

Khamsin's all-too-serious face was mere inches away. Surprised, I sat up and quickly put some distance between us.

"Huh?! Khamsin, I didn't realize you were into... I mean, that's totally fine and I support you, but I'm not..."

"Lord Van, something is wrong."

"Um, if anything, I'd say you're the one moving kind of abruptly..."

With how confused I was, we seemed to be talking past each other. Khamsin gestured for me to be quiet, his expression unchanged. I followed his lead. I was finally awake, which meant my brain was working properly. I could hear noise outside, but nobody was speaking—almost like some burglars were trying to break in.

"Burglars? With all these knights around?" I whispered.

Khamsin put his hand on the Van-made sword at his hip and turned toward the entrance. He said quietly, "They are still outside. Please wait a moment."



Watching Khamsin approach the entrance, I hastily changed from my comfy sleepwear into a set of light wood block armor. I also grabbed my twin orichalcum swords, my best equipment. If I was a little bigger and had more muscle on me, I could wear mithril armor, but wood block or monster scale was the best I could equip for now.

Geared up, I felt some of the fear drain out of me. “I just don’t get how burglars could show up with all these Chivalric Orders here,” I muttered.

Outside, the quiet night in the mountains was broken by the sound of something brushing against the trees. That was enough to instill a different kind of fear in me, and I’m sure the girls in the other room felt the same.

“Khamsin, are Till and Arte asleep?” I asked.

“I have been able to hear them moving next door for a while now, so I don’t think so.”

The base we were in had only a single floor. There was a living room in the front, with the two bedrooms off to either side. Of all the different kinds of bases I’d made, this was the easiest when it came to simple lodgings. (By the way, His Majesty’s base had a room for the royal guards to stay in and a bedroom beyond that. Both rooms were fairly spacious, and the men seemed happy with their lodgings.)

Unfortunately, I’d designed the interior specifically for resting. No matter how you looked at it, it wasn’t meant to be a defensive fortification. Khamsin understood this, which explained why he was moving so slowly and carefully toward the bedroom door. He managed to make the process completely silent, like some kind of ninja.

A loud noise came suddenly from the entrance, almost as if it were timed. It sounded a lot like someone was trying to kick the door down.

Khamsin leapt back, startled, then froze in place. Someone, or several someones, was trying to force the door open, and the noise was deafening.

“Good thing it’s locked,” I whispered. The door was bolted shut from the inside with wood blocks, so breaking it open would be no easy task. At least, that’s what I hoped.

Just then, some kind of black stick poked through the gap between the door and the frame. It began to lift the wood block that was bolting the door shut.

“Oh, come on. That’s not fair,” I said, unable to keep myself from cracking a joke. I was really regretting not making that bolt a horizontal one, but there was no point crying over spilled milk. No matter how much I worried, it wouldn’t stop the door from opening.

“Lord Van, do not leave the bedroom,” Khamsin ordered without looking my way. He tightened his grip on his sword, ready to cut down any intruders the second they entered. His knees were bent slightly, keeping his center of gravity low. Seeing how tightly he gripped his sword made me even more tense.

But just as he was preparing to move, the sound of an explosion came from the entrance. It echoed through the bedroom, hurting my ears. There was no way to know what had happened without approaching the entrance, but maybe if I stayed close behind Khamsin, I could see something.

When I looked at Khamsin’s face, though, he was grinning. He turned around to face me. “I was right. Lady Arte was awake.”

“Uh, Arte?” Unthinking, I made my way to the door and looked outside. Two of Arte’s Aventador Dolls flanked the entrance. “What the—?!”

I heard someone screaming outside, then more angry yells from afar.

“Who in the hell are you?!” bellowed one voice.

“Capture them at once!” said another.

Then came the sounds of fierce combat, metal clanging against metal.

“Lord Van, are you all right?”

Till and Arte approached us, mindful of their surroundings. A doll equipped with mithril armor was following Arte.

“I’m okay, thanks.” I sheathed my twin swords, feeling mixed emotions. It had been Arte who saved us this time, and that made me both happy and sad. “I really need to work out more.” *Maybe I’ll ask Dee to increase my training hours.*

Khamsin nodded earnestly. “I will accompany you!”

I offered him a pained smile and nodded. He wasn’t playing around.

Eventually, we heard more yelling outside. “Lord Van, are you okay?!” It was Dee who appeared this time, beads of sweat rolling down his forehead.

I waved at him. “I’m okay! Did you catch the intruders?”

Dee grimaced and drew his chin in. “It seems as though they had assistance from one of the Chivalric Orders, so unfortunately, they got away. But I do have an idea of who it was.”

His low, menacing tone filled me with dread. He must’ve been terribly aggravated about letting the culprits get away. I laughed dryly and shook my head.

“It is what it is. I asked you to assist the rest of the march—there was no way you could’ve been here with me. If anything, I’m impressed by how quickly you got here.”

“I slipped out of the formation,” he said with a smile.

“Thanks. I know I can always count on you, Dee.”

“Ha ha ha! Next time, I’ll crush those conniving bastards!” He smiled and thrust his chest out.

I smiled back politely, picturing the various Chivalric Orders that he must’ve passed after he left the formation. I’d have to apologize later.

Unfortunately for us, now that we knew the lawless jerks who tried to break in were backed by a Chivalric Order, we had to investigate. A noble could not let such an act go unpunished, and putting my power on display would have the

side effect of indirectly keeping other nobles in check. There were plenty of reasons to do this, but the short version was that, as a noble, ignoring someone who tried to harm you came with its own set of problems. Investigating the attempted breakin was a pain in the butt, but I had to do it.

I sighed heavily, trailing behind a very angry Dee. Lowe and Arb joined us about ten minutes later, equally furious. Maybe it was contagious, because even Khamsin's shoulders were shaking with rage.

Just for the record, the Seatoh Village knights guarding the area near my private quarters were angry too, and the two young men who were supposed to have been patrolling the area were deeply depressed. I'd been told that another Chivalric Order had approached them to swap shifts so they could go eat, and they'd accepted the offer.

More to the point, they'd been approached by two middle-aged knights in fancy armor. Those knights had told the pair of young guards that their duties kept them from moving around freely, so they wanted a chance to take a break and eat. In reality, high-ranking knights would never be assigned to night duty without being given ample time to rest, but the young men fell for it hook, line, and sinker.

I couldn't blame them too much, though. They were part of an army on the march that was composed of nobles and their Chivalric Orders. It was easy to get confused about how things worked. Dee was furious with the two young guards, but I felt sorry for them. I'd often heard that when a person makes a big mistake, they never mess up in the same way ever again—and besides, nobody'd been hurt, so I wasn't that fussed. In fact, I was willing to intentionally repeat the situation if I could bait our enemy into the open.

But the fact remained that we were in the middle of an attempt to invade Yelenetta. While it was important for me to make a show of my power as a noble and to give the enemy no quarter, it was hard to judge how far was too far. I'd be a fool to do anything that delayed the march. That could draw the ire of not just His Majesty, but the other nobles too.

That said, I also couldn't sit back and do nothing.

I kept turning this difficult dilemma over in my head as I got back to paving the mountain road. I was in front of the carriage, laying down more wood blocks. "What am I going to do?" I whispered.

"Hmm? Did you say something?" asked Till, handing me a drink.

I accepted the cup and sipped the water inside. "Thanks. I'm just thinking about the culprit from last night. I'm guessing that either Viscount Tron or Baron Nouveau's Chivalric Order made a deal with some assassins..."

I trailed off, and Till grimaced. "But you have no proof. Is that right?" she asked, sounding angry. It was a quiet kind of rage. Till was too sweet a girl for it to have much bite to it.

All I could offer her was a pained chuckle and a shrug. "Nah, I think I can find proof. Arte blasted open the door, so the person or people on the other side probably sustained injuries. Maybe their armor's damaged, maybe they've got a door-shaped dent in them. The real problem lies elsewhere. Viscount Tron and Baron Nouveau are both part of a certain marquis' faction. In other words, they have a powerful backer."

I raised my head. Till, realizing what I was implying, looked back at me. "Marquis Fertio?"

I nodded grimly. It was unclear whether Jalpa's objective really was my assassination, but considering nothing was stolen, I couldn't think of many other options. It was possible he intended to threaten me into doing something, considering how highly His Majesty valued me.

If he really was gunning for me, him wanting to threaten me was actually the best possible scenario, as it would mean last night's incident was just a warning. Far more chilling was the idea that he wanted to make me his puppet or slave, while the worst-case scenario was that he wanted me dead.

He may have been my own father, but he was a nobleman through and

through. His behavior here was foolish, though. He'd miscalculated the timing and method with which to bring me down. Regardless of the military might that had enabled him to claw his way to the top, I couldn't imagine him acting so brashly.

It was possible that Tron and Nouveau had acted on their own, instead. If so, perhaps *they* wanted to make me their puppet so that they could use me to extort Jalpa in turn? The more I thought about it, the more likely that seemed.

"Okay," I said finally. "I'm going to summon Dee and have him investigate. I'll have him be obvious about it, so as not to worsen the situation."

Till blinked and tilted her head. "Why be obvious?"

"Going directly after multiple noblemen would negatively impact the march. Making our investigation blatantly obvious reduces the likelihood of catching the culprit. I expect His Majesty will understand what we're trying to do and provide aid, which will make it difficult for anyone else to target us."

Till groaned, looking pained. "I-I see. But does that mean letting the culprit get away with it? I know nobody was harmed, but..."

She clearly wasn't satisfied with the logic I had presented her. I shook a hand and smiled. "Don't worry. It won't be as simple as having some guards capture a bandit, but I will respond as befits a nobleman. In a way that nobody, not even Marquis Fertio, can complain about."

I asked Dee to investigate the suspected Chivalric Orders, then indirectly informed His Majesty and Panamera of the attack. Needless to say, they were both furious, but because we were on our way to war, we couldn't start fighting among ourselves. Nor could we investigate each Chivalric Order with nothing more than our suspicions to go on. They were the foot soldiers of the nobility, after all.

His Majesty was already busy handling the nobles at the top of the food chain,

preventing any damage to troop morale. Luckily, even a simple, angry announcement from the king that my base had been attacked last night would serve to deter my enemies. At this point, the chance that I would get attacked again on the march was near zero.

For two straight days, I focused entirely on road construction.

“Lord Van, the mountains are getting smaller!” Khamsin announced.

I nodded. Previously the skyline had been dominated by the towering mountains, but now much more of the horizon was visible. Sunlight bathed the road ahead of us, which was also much wider than before. We weren’t far from our destination.

As expected, the culprits behind the attack had gone quiet after their initial attempt to break into my base, and we were able to continue our march in peace. *Thank goodness*, I thought with relief.

Just then, the adventurers who’d been on recon duty returned. No sooner had Ortho arrived than he began apologizing. “Lord Van, I am so sorry for putting you in such a dangerous position.”

Ever since they learned about the attack on me, he and his people had been overflowing with concern for my wellbeing. I was sure it was partially guilt over their scuffle with the Chivalric Order in question, but even when I told them it was okay, they kept apologizing.

“Seriously, I’m fine. You worry too much. More importantly, having you guys on guard is the only reason we were able to make such good progress on this dangerous path. You’ve all been incredible.”

Ortho bowed his head deeply. “It means a lot to hear you say that. I’m also here to pass along a report from the front that our destination is now visible.”

“What?” I yelled. “Seriously?! You should have started with that!” I wanted to hurry and pave a road to our destination so that I could finally head straight

back to Seatoh Village.

Ortho clearly got the message, for he nodded, smiling gingerly. “Sorry. We should arrive within half a day.”

“Whoa, that’s awesome. I’m going to do my best to speed things up! When we get back to the village, it’s barbecue time!”

“Wonderful. I can’t wait.”

We exchanged smiles. Unfortunately, Ortho would be on guard duty for the march’s return trip too, so there was no way he’d be able to participate in the barbecue once I got back. I felt terrible about that, so I decided then and there to have another extravagant barbecue for him and the others when they returned.

After about three more hours of continuous road work, it finally happened. The landscape before us expanded outward, as if the mountains had split off to either side. In front of us was a road leading to a small hill.

“Beyond that hill is Ylenetta. There’s a fortress just past it, so it would be dangerous to cross.”

“Huh, really? Then what does His Majesty plan on doing?” I asked.

Then I noticed knights on their way over to me, accompanying a luxurious carriage that bore the royal family’s crest. Before it even arrived, everyone had taken a knee and lowered their heads.

“It is fine. Raise your heads,” said His Majesty, descending from the carriage. Nobody did as he said. He pointed at the hill. “The plan is to build a base of operations right here. It will be lower than the fortress wall, but the hill will provide a natural vantage point from which we can shower our enemies with arrows and treat the wounded when they return from past the hill. The problem is that once we pass the hill, we will have to cross a river *and* take their fortress. This will be a lengthy process.”

I nodded, looking in the direction he was pointing. “I see. From our enemy’s

perspective, this hill makes it difficult to lay traditional siege, while for us, it serves as a simple partition. But since the hill is still lower than the fortress wall, it would be dangerous if they arc their arrows up to reach us... Of course, that all depends on the distance they're firing from."

"Fear not. The plan is to build a defensive wall made of logs. Of course, we could build much stronger fortifications with your aid...but I have not forgotten our agreement to not send you to war." His Majesty's smile was meaningful.

I laughed dryly. "Well, I can at least help with the pre-battle preparations. How about a simple fortress on the hill?"

His Majesty nodded, satisfied. "I knew I could count on you. You are always one step ahead when it comes to intuiting the desires of others."

"...It is an honor and a privilege, Your Majesty."

The king boomed a laugh, his great mood undamaged by my snide response. "I swear, you do not act your age in the least!"

I wanted to go home sooner rather than later, but here I was with more work to do. Unfortunately for me, I had an enemy whose peerage far outranked mine, so I needed His Majesty on my side. I would feel too guilty asking Panamera or Ferdinatto for help. With that in mind, I got right to work designing the new fortress.

"I'll try and have this finished by nightfall."

"By nightfall?!" Till and Arte replied in unison. They were right—my declaration was frankly absurd. Even Khamsin, who had parked the carriage off to the side of the road, turned around with a surprised look on his face.

I glanced at the soldiers quietly preparing for battle along the newly completed road. It was just wide enough for two carriages to travel side by side, and currently filled with the men and women of the Chivalric Orders. Could I build a fortress that could accommodate all these people?

That was what everyone was probably thinking. And it was true that if the

enemy noticed what I was doing, there was no way I'd be able to finish the job. In fact, it would kick off the battle prematurely, and our troops wouldn't be ready to fight back. His Majesty's good mood would plummet like a roller coaster.

"I have a plan. Will you guys help me?" I asked with a smile.

Arte and Till exchanged glances and nodded at me. Further back, Khamsin said, "Of course!"

"Thanks. Okay, let's be quiet about this. Could you tell the Chivalric Order to gather timber for me? Oh, and ask Ortho and the others to monitor the enemy fortress for any movement."

"Understood!" said Khamsin.

Till said, "Yes, Lord Van!"

The two of them got to work. Arte, meanwhile, sat down in the chair I'd made for her.

"Could you tell me about your plan?" she asked.

Her gaze was filled with expectation. I smiled and nodded.

Chapter 5:

Time to Build a Fortress

“HHEY, PILE THOSE UP OVER HERE... NOPE, THOSE GO there... Huh? Those too?”

The soldiers of the Chivalric Order quietly followed my instructions, transferring walls, floors, and ceilings made from wood blocks. There weren't actually that many component parts, so the whole endeavor was moving along nicely. A large pile of wood block materials currently sat on the sloped hill.

“Okay, we're ready to go.” I turned around to face the king. Behind him, the other nobles were looking my way. “Your Majesty, may I?”

The king folded his arms and nodded. “Begin building the fortress. All earth mages, follow Baron Van's orders and put your magic to good use!”

Before me stood a formation of twenty or so earth mages, looking up at the hill. What a powerful sight! Most of them wore mage-appropriate robes or cloaks, and each had their Chivalric Order's crest on their back, arms, or legs. Their uniforms were also pretty colorful, which took me by surprise.

Cool.

The mages all directed their attention my way. I returned their gazes, then cleared my throat to speak. “All right, everyone. I hope you're ready. The most important thing is for us all to be in sync while we do this. We want to build this fortress in one go so that there's no chance for the enemy to stop us. Those of you building the front wall especially need to be swift and precise.”

Many of the mages looked doubtful as I explained how their magic would form the cornerstone of this operation, but even if they didn't trust me, I had His Majesty and the other nobles behind me. They nodded.

I chuckled and looked up at Dee, who stood behind me and off to the side. “All right, Dee! Let's take our positions.”

“Yes, Lord Van! Leave it to me!”

We began to walk up the hill. Dee moved diagonally forward, equipped with a massive tower shield I had just crafted for him.

Behind me, Till’s concerned voice said, “Lord Van...”

It wasn’t that I *liked* taking dangerous risks, but this time around, I didn’t have much choice. If speed was the priority, I had to be on the front lines.

As we crested the hill, we got our first glimpse of Yelenetta. There was a sharp descent in front of us, followed by a narrow bridge that crossed a small river. Beyond that sat a massive fortress. An even bigger one than I’d expected, in fact. It was a square building with black walls: an intimidating sight.

The soldiers atop the fortress’s wall quickly spotted us and started to clamor. We’d be facing a shower of arrows before long. Better not waste any time. From the corner of my eye, I saw Dee glaring at the fortress, shield in hand.

I turned around. “Mages! Deploy the wall!”

The magic users responded in sync.

Yelenetta Soldier

A REPORT CAME IN: A BIZARRE PAIR OF INDIVIDUALS had appeared atop the hill. Hearing this, the Second Chivalric Order, currently on lookout duty, frantically began to climb the fortress wall.

As soon as the whole order was together, I blurted out, “Are you telling me they passed through the Wolfsbrook Mountain Range?!”

The others must have been thinking the same thing, for they nodded, looking grim. My allies conversed among themselves as we climbed the wall to confirm the report. One soldier asked, “Are you certain our Chivalric Order hasn’t returned?”

“There are no wyverns in sight,” said another, “so how did those two get

through the mountains?”

A third said, “Maybe they’re skilled adventurers? But even then, I don’t see how the two of them could have made it through...”

We reached the top of the wall to find most of the Chivalric Order assembled there. The battlements were designed to be spacious, wide enough for three rows of bowmen to stand abreast. It was currently packed full of soldiers trying to figure out what was happening.

“Hey, what’s going on with the formation here? Your captains are going to lay into you guys if you all gather here like this,” I said, exasperated. To be fair, I was there too. It wasn’t like I had a leg to stand on.

I strained to catch a glimpse of the hill past the mob of soldiers in front of me. There were in fact two people there, one a large man and the other a child. They both wore armor, but they were very clearly not adventurers. They also didn’t look like scouts from an Order.

It was impossible for a child like that to pass through the Wolfsbrook Mountain Range. But then who were they? I had the uncanny feeling I was looking at a pair of ghosts. I wasn’t the only one who felt that way, judging by the silence that had fallen around me. Not one of the countless men on the wall made so much as a peep.

The silence was broken by the sound of metal clashing against metal as footsteps approached me rapidly. “What the hell are you all doing standing around when two suspicious people have shown up?!”

It was Steyr, the Second Chivalric Order’s commander, gripping his helmet at his side as he yelled. We all stood to attention, shaken by the fury in his voice.

Steyr’s long beard swayed as he donned his helmet, shoved the men aside, and approached the walls’ edge. When he spotted the pair on the hill, he betrayed his confusion with a single blink before collecting himself. That ability to stay calm and collected was precisely why he was our commanding officer.

“This is the fortress of Yelenetta’s most westward territory!” he shouted to the strangers. “State your purpose here!”

The two people on the hill exchanged glances. Then the boy turned back to us and called, “Um, I’m Baron Van Nei Fertio of Scuderia! I’m here to build a fortress and—wait, should I not have introduced myself? Oh man, are they going to hold a grudge against me now?”

I was shocked to learn that the boy was the head of a noble family. The child who called himself a baron looked up at the man next to him with a concerned expression.

The older man shook his head, smiling. “I see no harm in it. Your name will be known throughout Yelenetta soon enough.”

The boy calling himself Van sighed, his shoulders sagging. “Well, it is what it is. Let’s try this again.”

He looked up again. Even facing down a towering enemy fortress and the Chivalric Order that defended it, he showed no hesitation or fear. Who *was* this child? We knew his name now, but that did nothing to relieve my mounting trepidation.

As for Baron Van, he paid no attention to our feelings.

“Um, let’s try this again! I am Van Nei Fertio, a baron from Scuderia! I’m here today to build a fortress atop this hill! Once I finish, I’m going home! Immediately! If you have any questions, please visit Seatoh Village in Scuderia! I’ll be getting started now!”

The moment he finished his introduction, the ground began to tremble. The troops were overcome with confusion as a massive wall sprouted from the hill, accompanied by the deafening sound of stones crashing into the earth. The cacophony only mounted, and before we could get our bearings, several more stone walls had appeared atop the hill.

Steyr was the first to get his bearings. “Earth mages!” he shouted hastily.

“Archers, rain death upon them!”

The archers did as he said, but we all knew normal arrows were no match for what was happening in front of us. Not only was there a great distance between us and the hilltop, but the walls that had been erected were tall enough for anyone atop them to look down at us. Much taller than the walls of our fortress. Predictably, the arrows failed to clear that barrier, striking the stone instead and plummeting to the ground.

Steyr grunted in frustration. “They have planned well for this! Prepare the black balls! With walls that large, they won’t be able to see what we are doing! Destroy them!” He quickly descended the wall.

“Ooh, the commander’s panicking,” said a soldier.

“Of course he is,” said another. “The enemy’s trying to build a fortress while he’s on guard duty. If they manage to create fortifications that can hold out against his, his head might be on the chopping block.”

“This isn’t the time for jokes! If they finish that fortress, we’re all in trouble. I wouldn’t be surprised if they hit us with a storm of magic during the night.”

Hearing these discouraging conversations all around me, I looked at my allies atop the wall. I understood they were shaken, but earth magic typically collapsed in on itself after five or ten minutes. Destroying their walls would be a simple process—once the earth magic lost its effectiveness, all we had to do was engulf them with fire magic. Right?

Reassured by these thoughts, I looked down at the cavalry riding out from the fortress gates toward the hill. The cavalry captain was shouting instructions to his troops. “Turn back as soon as you throw your projectiles! Horses are hard to control when they’re scared or surprised, so be careful!”

A few seconds later, a series of explosions erupted atop the hill. A normal wall would, at the very least, be riddled with cracks after an attack like that. Depending on how thick the structure was, a single black ball attack could even destroy it entirely. The same went for walls constructed via earth magic.

“Get some distance and prepare for the second wave!”

Orders flew every which way as the cavalry, all twenty or so of them, returned to the fortress. Yes, we were prioritizing mobility, but even so, this was a small group. They must have grabbed whoever could be dispatched immediately to launch a surprise attack.

“Captain! Part of the northern section has collapsed!”

“Excellent! Focus your firepower there! Divide their attention and have two people throw from the opposite side!”

“Yessir!”

As instructed, the cavalry moved on to the next stage of the attack. This whole assault was made possible by decisive thinking and accuracy. If they could open a hole in the wall, they could throw black balls through it, thus ending the battle.

Nearby, I heard someone say, “Good. I was a bit concerned at the start, but victory will be ours after all.” Even though they weren’t speaking directly to me, I nodded, watching the battle unfold.

But then something unexpected happened. I heard the enemy speaking to each other—

“Dee, protect me!”

“Understood!”

—and the earth walls abruptly changed shape. Could that child be capable of casting all this earth magic by himself? If so, how could he possibly make modifications after the initial spell?

As I watched, stunned, a separate group of people joined us atop the battlements. They wore black robes and were equipped with mithril shields. At long last, our most powerful forces had arrived.

“Mage squad!” The First Chivalric Squad commander, Hellenic, had joined the mages on the wall. “Annihilate their defenses!”

“Yessir!” said the captain of the mage squad. “Everyone, use your most appropriate castle siege spells! But not at the same time—fire off your spells in order! Begin casting!”

While the mages started casting their spells, the cavalry on the ground rode out again to break through the enemy’s magic walls. Perfect timing. The captain shouted, “Throw your projectiles!” and the cavalry launched their black balls, then beat a hasty retreat.

Behind them, the very air thrummed with the force of successive explosions. This time, the cavalry had focused their attacks on a single point, producing a massive crack in the center of the enemy’s wall.

That was when Hellenic barked his next orders. “There! Aim there!”

The mages began casting their spells at the wall: fire, stone, ice, and wind magic, smashing into the structure one after another, like surging waves. Even though the attacks were from my own allies, a shiver ran down my spine.

Judging by the murmurs around me, I wasn’t the only one. “Whoa...”

“What impressive magic!”

“Nothing could still be standing after that.”

The infantrymen watched, awed and trembling in fear at the thought of being on the wrong end of an attack like that. Any soldier with real combat experience had to feel the same way. The black balls were terrifying, yes, but magic was on a whole different level. Depending on your formation and equipment, even one of those spells could mean instant death.

A chill still running down my spine, I gazed at the cloud of dust that had consumed the hill. So many spells had been cast that it was taking some time for the area to clear. Eventually, the dust began to settle, and as it did so those of us up on the battlements started to yell—myself included. None of us could hide our shock.

The dust cleared, revealing an immense fortress on the hill. At the center, left,

and right of the building stood structures like watchtowers. The fortress itself wasn't as large as ours—it couldn't be, in that narrow terrain—but it was still gigantic.

“How did they do that,” I asked slowly, “while taking so many sustained magical attacks...?”

I had no idea what magic the enemy had used, but any wall should have crumbled under our mages' attack. If we couldn't break through their wall, that meant our only options would be to occupy their fortress or cut off its supply lines.

“This is going to be a drawn-out battle,” I whispered.

Just then, the front gates were opened for the returning cavalry. They hurried into the fortress.

“Curses! What is that thing?” Steyr thundered. His unease was plain for everyone to see. “How did they build it so quickly?!”

Hellenic, the First Chivalric Squad's captain, approached him. “Commander Steyr! How could something like that have been built so quickly?! Why couldn't we stop them?!”

Steyr groaned bitterly. “You saw it yourself, didn't you? Two people showed up on the hill, declared their intent to build a fortress, and then moments later...it is as you see! Who in the hell do you think could have stopped them?!” he demanded, making even Hellenic fall silent.

As if to rub salt in our wounds, we heard a child's voice say, “We're going to perform a test fire! Um, all of you over in Yelenetta, please be careful! Are we ready? Okay, let's do it!”

Everyone turned around to face the direction of the voice, only to find that two large weapons had materialized atop the enemy's fortress.

“What the hell are those?” I whispered. “I've got a bad feeling about this...”

I crouched down. If that was some kind of catapult, this location was anything

but safe, so I braced myself for the worst.

Somehow reality was even crueler. The air trembled, a loud boom rocked my gut, and the wall of our fortress began to shake as if we had been struck by an earthquake. It was clear that their weapons had done *something*, but I couldn't figure out exactly what. Had they misfired?

But as soon as I had that thought, I heard terrified shouting from below.

"A massive spear has pierced the fortress wall! Nobody was hit, but the watchtower's pillar is broken! It could collapse at any second!"

"What?!"

A wave of panic washed over all of us. And here I'd thought we were in for a long battle. Who would have imagined the enemy could do such damage while still holed up in their fortress?

"Curses! What's going on?!" Hellenic yelled, panicked, but there was nothing to be done. A second blast erupted from the fortress on the hill.

Let's rewind a bit.

"Just to confirm, we'll be fine even if their archers shoot at us, right?" asked Dee.

"Yes," I said. "There should be no problem whatsoever!"

I repeated myself thrice just to be safe, and Dee nodded, a brilliant smile on his face. What was he so jazzed about when we were about to face down an entire enemy fortress? He was practically skipping as he led the way, even though he was carrying that massive shield.

Exasperated by his attitude, I cautiously climbed the hill. The horizon widened to reveal a beautiful sky and a black, foreboding fortress that didn't suit the scenery at all. The whole thing cast an oppressive aura over its surroundings.

"Gah, it's bigger than I thought," I said. I was genuinely impressed. "It's more

like a small town. And check out the fortress wall! We'd have to ask the mages for help if we wanted to attack that thing head-on."

Dee nodded, then crouched to slap the ground with one hand. "This hill is also a problem. The mages will have to cast their magic from here, but the walls of their fortress are a little taller than this hill, so the enemy archers will have the high ground. This terrain won't make it easy for us to use magic against them. Even if we dispatch lots of troops to break through their gates, the slope of the road and the narrow river before their fortress are bad news. If they shut themselves in, then starvation tactics would be our only shot for taking them out."

He kept analyzing our situation from the perspective of the attacker. Fortunately for me, I didn't plan to stick around long enough for the attack. "Shall we get started?" I asked. "Think they're ready?"

I smiled to cover up my concern and turned around to look down the hill. The Seatoh Village Chivalric Order, the adventurers, and the mages were all watching us.

"They look ready," I confirmed. Then I took a deep breath. "Okay, time to do this."

The second we'd crested the hill, one of the soldiers on the fortress wall had noticed us. Dee judiciously held up his tower shield while I signaled the mages.

"It'll take a minute or two once they start casting, right?" I asked.

"Correct. In fact, the scale of what we're asking them to do is large enough that it might even take three full minutes."

While we were discussing this, a bunch of soldiers had ascended to the fortress wall. There were archers among them.

"Whoa," I said, "they've already rounded up the troops. They seem well trained."

Dee snorted and pointed at the wall. "They're only up there to see what's

happening. Truly well-trained soldiers would be preparing themselves for the possibility of being stormed by any number of enemy soldiers. As many as ten thousand troops, even. My Chivalric Order would be on standby with their bows, ready to fire as soon as I gave the order.”

“Incredible! Okay, I get it. Basically, if we were to storm them now, we’d have no problem breaking right through their gates.”

As we chatted, a middle-aged man emerged from the group of soldiers on the wall and looked at us. He yelled, “This is the fortress of Yelenetta’s most westward territory! State your purpose here!”

“Wow, his voice sure carries.”

“He must be the commander,” Dee explained. “To issue orders on a large battlefield, you need to be able to yell loudly.”

“Huh, I never even considered that. Well, I better answer him.” Now wasn’t the time to be chatting with Dee. I cut our conversation short and yelled back at the man. “Um, I’m Baron Van Nei Fertio of Scuderia! Today I’m here to build a fortress and—wait, should I not have introduced myself? Oh man, are they going to hold a grudge against me now?”

I looked over at Dee.

“I see no harm in it. Your name will be known throughout Yelenetta soon enough,” Dee replied, even finding the energy to joke with me.

With a sigh, I switched gears. “Well, it is what it is. Let’s try this again.” I looked back up at the wall, where the middle-aged man was staring at me, bewildered. I cleared my throat, then took a deep breath. “Um, let’s try this again! I am Van Nei Fertio, a baron from Scuderia! I’m here today to build a fortress atop this hill! Once I finish, I’m going home! Immediately! If you have any questions, please visit Seatoh Village in Scuderia! I’ll be getting started now!”

As soon as I finished yelling, I heard the mages at our rear begin to cast their

spells. “We are casting!”

I turned around and nodded. A second later, huge walls appeared in front of me: the result of the mages’ simultaneous casting. Soon, the walls covered the entire area in front of us, towering over our surroundings.

“Now this is useful. I’d love to put together a mage squad for our village, too,” I mused.

“A wise idea. A handful of elemental mages would give us a much greater range of tactics to choose from in combat. They are vital to any army.”

I watched the walls grow, then raised a hand to stop the mages. Turning to the Seatoh Chivalric Order and the adventurers, I said, “Adventurers, knights, you guys are up next. Good luck!”

“Yessir!” said Ortho.

“Understood!” said Arb.

They moved into action, hustling to carry their assigned building materials up the hill. Khamsin and Lowe also got to work at their respective stations.

Commands flew every which way as team leaders scrambled to get the fortress assembled. “We’ll build the ground floors for the right and left sides first!”

“Build the heart of the fortress here!”

We were flying by the seat of our pants, but everyone was quick and responsive. Seeing that level of cooperation warmed my heart.

“Okay, now it’s my turn,” I said. I prepared myself, inspired by the reliable people all around me. “First, the center.”

I placed a hand on a section of the wall made of earth magic. It would be the basis for the fortress wall.

“Harden... Harden...” I focused my magical energy into the wall. I was picturing a wall made of concrete, but given the sheer size of the thing I needed

to produce, this was going to take a while. Arrows could come flying over the wall at any moment, so it was prudent to have our able-bodied troops carry the materials and put them together while I worked.

Wow, who came up with such a great plan? Just Van, the one and only boy super-genius. Great job, me!

With a new spring in my step, I kept on working. At this rate we'd have the fortress done in no time.

As if on cue, I heard something crack on the other side, and the wall sent violent vibrations through my hand and up my arm. It nearly knocked me over.

"Ugh, those black balls," I groaned. Had they opened a hole in the wall? I shook my head, trying to visualize what had happened—then sensed something off. I whipped around and saw that a portion of the wall had been destroyed, leaving a hole big enough for our enemies to enter.

This was bad. I pictured Yelenettan soldiers throwing black balls through the hole, and then a chill shot down my spine. "Dee, protect me!"

"Understood!" Dee instantly raised his massive shield and stepped in front of me, facing the hole. I put my hand on the wall and began to pour my magic into it, focusing everything on repairing this single point. If I didn't hurry, the black balls would come flying, and not even Dee would emerge unscathed from a direct hit.

Under normal circumstances, no amount of repair work could return a wall to its original strength once part of it had cracked. If our enemies were operating under that assumption, they would focus their attacks on the same point again.

Ugh, how had it come to this? I just wanted to go home.

Orders kept flying around me.

"Hurry! Focus on durability over height!"

"Watch for attacks from above! Their arrows could fly right over!"

I focused on the fortress. Since we had prepared the materials ahead of time, the work went several times faster than it normally would. Just as planned.

Unfortunately, dealing with so many materials meant mistakes were unavoidable. I pointed them out whenever I noticed them, even as I rushed to fuse together the materials people constructed for me. “Ah, that’s for the flooring! Lay those out!”

“Got it!”

“That’s for the exterior wall!”

“Roger that!”

I’d repaired the damaged wall by this point, so my top priority was ensuring that this fortress functioned like one. Before I could do that, though, I heard horses from the other side of the wall, then loud blasts against its surface.

“Black balls again?!” I cried. “How many do they have? They have to run out soon, right?”

Even from my position of relative safety on this side of the wall, the sounds of explosions didn’t exactly inspire comfort. My ears hurt, the vibrations were jolting through my stomach, and whether I liked it or not, I was afraid. Hearing explosions so close to me really soured my mood.

My fear was born of knowing exactly what gunpowder was and why it was so dangerous. I couldn’t even begin to imagine how my Chivalric Order, having no idea how the stuff worked, must have felt. Even in a world that valued magic most of all, there was no doubt in my mind that gunpowder would be a game-changing weapon in the future. We had to find a way to produce the stuff in Seatoh Village.

I thought this over as I worked on the fortress. Soon enough, I heard a different kind of impact against the wall. As predicted, they were focusing their attacks on the area they’d damaged in the first assault.

“Ha ha ha! You’re so obedient, Yelenetta!” I shouted over the cacophony.

“Want to bring me some sweet milk bread, too? How about some cream puffs?”

Was this nonsense I was spouting just what happened to people who found themselves in extreme combat? I wasn't even doing any fighting! Feeling very stupid, I redoubled my efforts, hoping to finish the fortress in one fell swoop. I'd already completed everything up through the second floor. Next came the third floor, and then I'd finish off with the towers, which essentially functioned as a fourth floor.

“Dee, we're going up to the second floor!” I said.

“Understood!” he called back cheerfully.

Ortho, Arb, Lowe, and Khamsin all snatched up materials and hit the ground running, shouting at each other to hurry. They preceded me up the stairs.

Oh, come on. How do they have so much stamina? I've been training under Dee too!

As I reached the roof, I found my sightlines obstructed, like I'd entered some kind of sandstorm. I braced myself and looked around cautiously. Ahead of me, Dee said, “It's dust from all the explosions and spells.” His shield didn't waver.

Meanwhile, intermittent blasts collided with the fortress wall. They didn't sound like explosions, so they must have been magic attacks.

“Visibility is bad up here,” I said to Dee's back. “Since we can't see what the enemy is up to, I'd better hurry and at least put up the bones of the fortress.”

Before my eyes, Dee suddenly shook. He lowered his hips and braced himself, groaning with effort as he leaned back toward me. He must've blocked a magic attack with his shield. “Dee?!”

“Ha ha ha! I'm fine!” He rolled his shoulders, then took his shield up again. I looked down at his feet and saw chunks of stone about the size of large fists rolling away. He must have used his shield to block a huge boulder flying toward us, then destroyed it. What a terrifying man.

I continued my work on the fortress. I built small windows into the towers on the left, right, and center of the building—they'd make good sniping positions.

"Lord Van! The dust is clearing!" Dee reported just as I completed the right-side tower.

"Just in the nick of time." I flashed him a weary smile as I slapped an uneven wall onto the roof. The front of the fortress was complete.

I walked back into the fortress, but Dee stayed behind, staring up at the towers. "This is incredible."

"What's incredible?" I asked, turning back.

Dee looked briefly surprised at my question. "This fortress. To build something like this in such a short span of time... This will change the way wars are fought." He grinned. "It's unfortunate you're the only one capable of things like this."

"Yeah, well, save your compliments, we're not done yet! We have to hurry and beef up our defenses!"

"Ooh, ballistae? Excellent. At this range, our enemies don't stand a chance."

I quickly set the ballistae up along the roof of the fortress while chatting with a very cheery Dee. Surely two rapid-fire ballistae would be enough for now.

"We have shields, so we should be fine, right?" Glancing away from the ballistae and over to the enemy's fortress, I frowned. Two people who looked to be high-ranking knights were quarreling with one another. "Huh? Are they fighting over there?"



Next to me, Dee chuckled. “They may have anticipated that our objective was to establish a fortress here, but I doubt they know it’s now fully functional. They must have a pretty thoughtless commander in charge, too. Who would pick a time like this to start pointing fingers? Surely they understand this isn’t the time for blame?”

I smirked at his exasperated tone, looking back at the Yelenetta fortress. “I feel bad interrupting them, since they look like they’re having a blast, but I want to hurry up and perform a test fire so we can go home. On with the show!”

Moments later, the Seatoh Chivalric Order and adventurers reached the top of the fortress. Khamsin was the first person to ask the big question: “Lord Van, is it complete?”

I nodded and pointed at the ballistae. “We’re going to do a ballista test fire, so get ready.”

“Yessir!”

Paula, the captain of my super-powerful rapid-fire machine bow squad, stepped forward like she’d been born for this moment. “Leave it to the machine bow squad!”

The members of the Seatoh Village Chivalric Order had long since become pros at operating the ballistae. They finished their preparations swiftly and turned to me. “Ready to fire!”

I nodded and looked at the enemy fortress off in the distance.

“We’re going to perform a test fire! Um, all of you over in Yelenetta, please be careful! Are we ready? Okay, let’s do it!”

Chapter 6:

I Finished the Fortress, So Can I Go Home Now?

“HOW CAN THIS BE?” HIS MAJESTY WHISPERED. HE WAS climbing to the top of the fortress, gazing at the tower in the building’s center and looking thoroughly astonished. “It’s incredible that you were able to build a fortress like this while fending off a concentrated magic attack. If the enemy did something like this, I would be horrified. After all, this structure is equipped with your ballistae—if this isn’t a terrifying threat, I don’t know what is.”

He turned around to look at Count Ferdinatto, who nodded. “Indeed, Your Majesty. I truly am grateful that Baron Van is on our side. With this fortress, we can save soldiers who otherwise would have perished in combat.”

Ventury and Panamera both nodded at Ferdinatto’s words, but Jalpa and a handful of the other nobles grimaced. I watched them out of the corner of my eye, then turned to face the king. “All right, Your Majesty, I think I’ll be going...”

The king raised a hand, stopping me in my tracks, and smiled. “Now, now. What’s the hurry, Baron Van? If you leave now, you will have to travel through the mountains at night. Why not rest here under the Chivalric Orders’ protection and set out tomorrow?”

“Um. Well, it seems like the war is about to break out this very second...?”

Getting involved in the battle was the last thing I wanted. I knew how rude it was to reject the king’s offer, but I just didn’t want to go to war. I figured I could smile, bow considerably, and decline his offer in a reserved fashion, but the king was having none of it.

“Fear not. No one is telling you to go to war. I would, however, greatly appreciate it if you made a few more buildings to the rear of the fortress.”

“Understood. I am deeply grateful for your consideration. I will get to work at once.” This wasn’t an order from His Majesty, but rather a request, so I

wouldn't feel right turning him down in front of the other nobles. I could only bow my head and do as he asked.

His Majesty, for his part, looked pleased as punch. "I knew I could count on you! You always put the kingdom first!"

Yeah. I really, really had no choice but to obey. Still, I could at least build the place the way I wanted. Architectural design and construction, what a great summer vacation!

I dragged Dee, Khamsin, the Seatoh Chivalric Order, and the adventurers with me down the steps of the fortress. As if we'd timed it that way, a loud explosion sounded then from the other side of the building, shaking the very ground. The fighting had started in earnest.

I'd installed ballistae, but given the size of their fortress, the battle would still be long and drawn out. They had mages, too. It was possible our ballistae could be destroyed in the fight. Granted, they would have to be very powerful mages to make that happen.

I checked out the rear of the fortress, silently patting myself on the back. Before me lay the freshly paved road and an abundance of trees that grew out of the uneven terrain. I couldn't construct anything too big, but other than that, my skill was the only limit. *What should I build?*

It was then that Till and Arte descended from my carriage. With a relieved expression, Till exclaimed, "Thank goodness you're okay, Lord Van!"

"Till was very worried about you," Arte said. Till nodded tearfully.

I smiled at Arte. "So does that mean you weren't all that worried?" I teased.

Arte blinked. Her cheeks turned bright red, and she looked down. "I-I was. But I know all about your magic, so I was sure you would be okay."

I offered her a nod. "All thanks to Dee, Khamsin, and the Seatoh Chivalric Order. Ortho and his people also worked their butts off. We were successful because the construction process went so well." I looked around. "Now then,

I'm going to build out the rear of the fortress some more. Everyone—" I cut myself off, watching the knights and adventurers going up and down the stairs carrying wood blocks. "Actually, how about we take a rest first?"

Giving them even more work might be overkill right now. Only a predatory company would force this kind of work on their employees. If I were one of those employees, I'd be filing complaints and advocating for my rights.

But Khamsin, still holding a wood block, shook his head fiercely. "If you're working, then there's no way I can take a break."

"Come on, everyone's probably exhausted. Right, guys?"

Ortho and the others turned around, standing there with wood blocks slung over their shoulders. Ortho said, "Did you say something? And where should we put these?"

"I'll do anything ya want!" Kusala chimed in. "I'm countin' on you when it comes time to build my second hotel!"

They were both grinning. Sure, they had ulterior motives, but they were doing such good work this time around, I decided to forgive them. If they wanted rewards, I wouldn't mind crafting some mithril weapons for them afterward.

While I thought it over, the captain of my super-powerful rapid-fire machine bow squad looked over at me. She was holding a wood block too. "Lord Van, the Chivalric Order will help as well! We're up for anything!" Paula said excitedly.

"Whoa, you guys are really giving me corporate slave vibes. You'd do great at a predatory company," I joked, trying to cover up how embarrassed and pleased I was. "In that case, everyone, I'm counting on you to help expand the fortress!"

"Incredible! Little Van transformed the cool fortress into something truly spectacular!"

“Hm? Did you say something, Lord Van?” Khamsin asked.

This earnest reply to my joke was the most embarrassing counterattack he could possibly have hit me with. I nodded vaguely and averted my gaze. “I was, uh, just saying that I’m glad we finished the fortress.”

Khamsin nodded, beaming. “Yes! The fortress is incredible! I knew you could do it, Lord Van!”

Because we had so many people who needed to be accommodated, I made all the rooms massive, and the fortress wound up a tad bigger than I’d initially anticipated. I didn’t regret it, though. This was the most fascinating building I’d made yet.

I gazed up at my creation, utterly satisfied.

The first problem I had to confront was the narrow road and the mountain slopes to either side of it. If I didn’t handle those properly, I’d never have been able to construct a structure large enough to provide lodgings to the royal army. I made the first floor the same width as the road, then built the second floor a little wider. Only the second floor was connected to the fortress I’d constructed earlier, making it easier to protect. This was key.

I made each subsequent floor wider yet. When all was said and done, the second, third, and fourth floors looked like an umbrella eclipsing the mountain road. The third and fourth floors followed the slope of the mountain to either side, so I shaped them to hug those slopes. Building the base along the road made it long and visually striking—a rather avant-garde design, if I did say so myself. It would have been even classier as a high-rise, but that was impossible with only wood blocks on hand.

As it was, the first floor functioned as both a lobby and a hallway, and it was stupidly long. I separated several sections of it into rooms. At the entrance, the center of the first floor, and the back were stairs leading to the second floor, which had rooms for resting, eating, and bathing. All the lodgings were on the third floor, while the fourth held individual rooms designated for royalty and

nobles, places to hold meetings, and a storage area for important items.

“A fair number of people can rest here. Oh, right—His Majesty told us to stay the night. Sorry guys, guess we’ll be heading home tomorrow.”

I turned around to find Arte and Till looking relieved.

“Is that so?” asked Arte. “The evening is almost upon us, so it would be a relief to be able to rest here tonight.”

“It worries me a little to be right on the front lines, but I know we can trust your work,” said Till. “Will we be staying on the third floor?”

I held up a hand and quickly corrected them. “No, no. Staying in the same place as the other Chivalric Orders would be far too dangerous. Remember, we were attacked not too long ago. I’ll be building our accommodations some distance away.”

“...You mean right now?” Till asked, wide-eyed.

I folded my arms. “Yeah. Don’t worry, it shouldn’t take me more than an hour.” *Just take a look at how thick my trusty biceps are getting! Pretty macho for a nine-year-old, right? Okay, yes, Till’s sweets are so good that I may have a little bit of a belly, but let’s just call that part of my charm!* “Now then, one final push.”

Panamera

“FLAME JAVELIN!”

I cast my spell, destroying another portion of the enemy fortress walls. At this point, a number of mages had landed magical attacks on the structure, but it was still holding up. Well, that was to be expected of a fortification built to defend a strategic point. Our enemies had proven themselves plenty capable of defending against our mages’ attacks, even going so far as to strike back.

“I’m almost out of magical energy,” I groaned. I took two steps back,

prompting Count Ventury to pat my shoulder and swap places with me.

“Go and rest.”

“Understood.” As I turned my back to the battlefield, climbing to the fortress’s second floor, the sounds of the battle followed me.

I clicked my tongue slightly and asked myself, “Have I been too hasty in pursuit of glory? I didn’t expect their defenses to hold after more than half a day’s fight alongside veteran mages. It appears that we underestimated our enemy. Our fortress is made of stronger stuff than theirs, though, so as long as we stay alert during the night, it will only be a matter of time before... Hmm?”

As I reached the second floor, I sensed that something was off. Had the interior of the fortress always looked like this? I’d been in this spot so recently, and yet...I was confused. It was different from what I remembered.

For one thing, there’d been no doors there before. I knew I was in a heightened mental state from the combat, but even so, I wouldn’t forget something like this.

I put a hand on the double doors and pushed them open. Beyond it was a hall that was comically long.

“What? What is going on?” I asked aloud. There was, of course, no one present to answer. I had ordered my people to support the other Chivalric Orders on the third floor, so none of them were around.

The hall was wide enough for two or three people to walk abreast, with evenly spaced doors going down either side. These rooms went all the way down the hall. The hall itself curved gradually to the right. It must’ve been built along the road itself.

Only one person could have thought this up and built it. “He’s made yet another strange thing,” I whispered with a sigh, then put a hand on my hip and shook my head. “Fascinating. I must find and complain to him directly.”

Knowing Van, he’d prioritized practical considerations when designing this

structure. As one of the people on the receiving end of his surprises, though, I had to complain regardless. Moreover, if I did not locate him posthaste and have him provide a guide for His Majesty, this could turn into an actual problem.

“Everything he makes is impressive, but his way of thinking is certainly childish,” I said, smiling to myself as I proceeded down the long hallway.

So he had come up with a long building that followed the length of the mountain road... A fascinating concept that nobody would ever think to implement on a battlefield. Still, even the most massive castles I’d been in had never had a hallway as long as this one. The fact that it was mapped to the shape of the road, hugging the mountain’s slopes, made it all the more interesting.

On the way, I noticed stairs leading upward. I passed by the first set, but when I reached the second, my curiosity got the best of me. I ascended to the next floor, only to find yet another hallway. Behind the door closest to me was a large room, similar to the soldiers’ lodgings in the bases we had used on our journey here. The biggest differences were the sheer quantity and size of these ones.

The fourth floor had a number of private rooms, but they were unfurnished. “I suppose he wouldn’t have had time for that. Still, even this much is impressive.”

My ability to judge these things had been impaired ever since I met that boy. I smiled at the thought, then exited the room and headed back down the stairs. Plenty of the Chivalric Orders had yet to enter the fortress, and they wouldn’t come through this area unless ordered to. That explained why I seemed to be the only person present.

I made my way back to the first floor and opened the conspicuously large double doors leading outside. My eyes widened as I took in the sight before me.

I spotted Panamera walking out of the fortress and waved a hand at her.
“Panamera!”

She made a beeline toward me and placed a strong hand on my shoulder. It actually kind of hurt. “Boy, what is this?”

“Huh?” I tilted my head.

She seemed not to like that response, pointing up with a serious look on her face. “This. What is this building?”

I looked up at the new structure in front of us. I’d left the road itself open, constructing the building to either side and connecting both halves with an arch. The design resembled a Shinto shrine, although I’d given it an exorbitant series of embellishments and a unique roof. It was artistic and beautiful.

“Um, so this is the Yomeimon Gate—I mean, it’s a type of castle gate. Since this was the last thing I worked on today, I kind of went all out. It’s about forty meters tall, and I paid a lot of attention to its exterior design—”

“Hold on. I am struggling to follow you. A castle gate? Why would you build something like that here?”

It was rare to see Panamera so confused. The truth was that I hadn’t put all that much thought into this, but there was no way I could tell her that. I glanced up at Yomeimon, then set my gaze back on Panamera. “I know for a fact that His Majesty will win this battle, so I wanted to build a spectacular gate that he could enjoy once he returned. By the way, the second floor and everything above it are lodgings, so I plan on staying there for the evening.” I smiled.

Panamera looked up at Yomeimon with an exasperated expression and sighed. “You certainly have a vivid imagination. The decorations and carvings lend the structure a kind of divine aura. May I go inside?”

“Huh? Ah, um, actually...”

Panamera narrowed her eyes. “You made something else, didn’t you? I’m going to go have a look.”

“W-wait, that’s—Panamera!” This felt a lot like having the cops suddenly appear to search your house. I panicked. I’d never expected her to just barge into my home without permission. Actually, my home was in Seato Village, so this was more like a villa.

A villa, huh? I like the sound of that. Makes me feel like a celebrity... Wait, no! I have to stop her before she goes in!

“P-Panamera! Please wait!” I hurried after her, but she climbed the stairs with such vigor that she was already on the second floor. That was where she stopped.

“Boy... This...”

I felt her judging eyes on me. The secret was out, so I sighed and gave up. “... Yes. This is going to be my room.” I began to explain, starting with the sofa nearby. “This sofa is made from a rare monster hide. I also put a lot of effort into the table and shelving. The windows are double layered and capable of holding up against most enemy attacks while still allowing light into the room. There is a toilet, bath, and a bedroom large enough for ten people to comfortably sleep in. On the third floor is an even more extravagant bedroom and living room. The modeling, walls, pillars, and ceilings here are spectacular enough, but the third floor is even more magnificent...”

The more I explained, the more I sensed my excitement taking over, so when Panamera began to speak in a low tone, I shut my trap.

“So His Majesty will be staying in this building, yes?” she asked.

“Uh, actually, this is for me and my—”

“So His Majesty will be staying here, yes?”

“...Yes, that is correct,” I said reluctantly. Only then did she let out a satisfied sigh.

“You truly are a terrifying boy, you know that? It’s like you lack any concept of fear. If you were a normal child, this could be dismissed as foolishness, but in

your case, no one could do that.” She was looking over the room, sounding slightly upset.

I understood what she was saying. Staying in a better room than His Majesty would cause all kinds of political problems. Even if His Majesty had no issues with it, he would still have to punish me because we were in the presence of other nobles.

Panamera was sticking her neck out for me by telling me to hand this building over to the king. That said, it still made me pretty sad; I’d put a lot of effort into it.

“Oh well. I guess I’ll make something else,” I whispered as I departed Yomeimon Gate.

Jalpa

I FELT IN MY BONES THAT MAGIC WOULD NOT PUT AN END to this battle—not for us and not for the enemy. After all, even if we destroyed a part of their fortress wall with magic, they would quickly repair it with dirt and strike back with magic of their own.

Thanks to our new fortress, we were able to fight on equal footing against Yelenetta despite our hill being lower than their fortress wall. Our situations had been equalized in terms of terrain—and when it came to the durability of our respective structures, we had an advantage.

But there was one other key element of this battle. Our fortress was on a narrow mountain road; theirs was a massive complex spread across flat land. Their battlements were wide, and they could focus their attacks on us in a way we couldn’t on them. In other words, while we could only attack in small numbers, they could attack us with their full forces.

“I am sure His Majesty has already realized this, but if we cannot spread our infantry and cavalrymen out, a castle siege will prove difficult,” I said.

The members of our Chivalric Orders had been swapping in and out as they ran out of magical energy, allowing us to keep up the attack, but few of our mages could actually strike the wall of the enemy's fortress. Much to my irritation, Van's ballistae were effective, but we only had so many bolts. His Majesty appraised them carefully, but his matter-of-fact conclusion was that they were ill-suited to taking down a fortress wall. In other words, he'd opted to save them for striking down Yelenetta's formidable mage squad.

This was undoubtedly a difficult decision. Normally, speed was of the essence during any engagements in hostile territory, because the enemy could easily resupply and summon reinforcements. By that logic, the goal should have been to take down the enemy's fortress as quickly as possible. From Yelenetta's perspective, their full-force invasion attempt had failed, and now one of their defense points was under attack. An unexpected attack, at that. If things went poorly here, they might be able to request help from a foreign nation.

Did His Majesty have information on Yelenetta's internal workings? Was he certain that a third party wouldn't step in? One way or another, it was clear he had something in mind.

I had used too much magic and couldn't think straight. "Stradale! I leave the rest to you!"

"Yessir!"

I retreated from the front lines. When I reached the rear, I stumbled into His Majesty, who was descending from the roof, accompanied by dozens of royal guards. Quite honestly, it would be more efficient for us if His Majesty stepped back so that we could have access to his men.

"Marquis Fertio, will you be taking a rest as well?" he asked. "Yelenetta may yet deploy dragons, so we will remain split into four groups and swap in and out to continue the attack. While the fortress can only provide lodgings for about two Orders, there is still plenty of space outside to rest. Besides, Baron Van might be expanding the fortress for us."

He said this last part with a meaningful smile. It felt almost like a threat. Either he'd heard what happened from Van or he'd come up with his own hypothesis.

Whichever it was, I could afford no mistakes. Baron Nouveau and Viscount Tron were behind what happened, and they were directly connected to me. I had been forced to give them strict orders to make no further moves for the time being. If His Majesty discovered that they were the culprits, he would trace it back to me.

"...Are you listening, Marquis Fertio?"

His Majesty was frowning, turning to look at me. I had let myself go too deep in thought. "Yes! My deepest apologies!"

He sighed lightly and continued down the stairs. I trailed him until he stopped before the doors. The royal guards stopped as well. Hoping to learn what was going on, I pushed past His Majesty's guards—and froze in place.

Before my eyes was a long corridor that had not been there the first time I came through.

"Did he build an annex to some barracks? How very like Baron Van. He always surprises me with his workmanship." His Majesty smirked and proceeded down the corridor. Clearly curious, he opened multiple doors along the way, but quickly turned his attention to the other floors when he realized they were all the same kind of room. "I saw a few sets of stairs along the way. I imagine there are personal rooms above. Does that mean he has set up an open bath below us? I wonder..."

He descended the stairs.

That made sense. All of Van's previous buildings had personal rooms on the upper floors for high-ranking officers. In light of that, I understood His Majesty's interest in the lower floors. I followed him, only to be greeted by another shocking sight.

We had descended the stairs furthest back in the building, but there were no rooms to be found. In fact, we found ourselves outside, faced with a mysterious gate.

“This is...spectacular...” Even His Majesty could not find the words to describe the structure in front of us. The royal guards were all speechless.

How could they not be, faced with a gate that grand?

“What style of building is this?” asked the king. “From what culture did it originate? It seems so refined. Marquis, do you know?”

“I-I do not. I have never seen decorations like this, much less the form.”

We went back and forth, and I found myself incapable of tearing my eyes from the astonishing gate. It was heavily engraved and decorated in a way that arrested the gaze, and yet the elements all came together in such a way that it felt like the most natural thing in the world. All I could say was that it was truly beautiful.

“Having seen his swords and now this, I can say without a shadow of a doubt that Baron Van is an artist of surpassing skill. To think he would create so magnificent a gate... But why here? Does he plan to protect against attacks from the opposite side by closing the gate? There are no walls to either side...”

“It is spectacular, but I do not think it is designed for combat. There also appear to be no doors.” Unable to answer His Majesty’s questions, all I could do was ask the same ones in a different way.

Before long, Panamera appeared from within the gate and walked toward us. “Your Majesty, will you be taking a break?” she asked like there was nothing out of the ordinary.

His Majesty, unable to answer, pointed at the gate. “Viscount Panamera, what is this? Is Baron Van here?”

Panamera grinned and nodded. “He was until a moment ago, but now he has left to build his own lodgings. This gate is a special facility he made for you to

rest in. What do you think? Would you like to take a look inside?”

Still looking somewhat perplexed, His Majesty nodded, and Panamera guided us both into the fascinating building. We climbed the stairs and passed through the first door. Immediately it was as if we had stepped into another world. The room was spectacularly bright and beautiful.

“Ooh, this is...” Even His Majesty, who lived in an extravagant castle, could only express words of wonder. As for me, I was dumbstruck, helpless to do anything but cast my unblinking gaze around the room.

The walls were painting in calming colors, while some sort of beautiful red carpet was laid over the floor. The wooden ceiling was covered in small embellishments, and though the pillars and ceiling beams were visible, their beautiful symmetry made the space feel balanced.

I touched one of the pillars. “How mysterious. They are merely carved wood, but they have such presence.” It wasn’t normal wood, though. Perhaps that was why?

The king hummed. “Indeed. But more impressive is the lighting. This does not seem to be a window...”

I looked up to see that multiple square pieces of glass were lodged into the ceiling, emitting light. “Oh, yes, you are right. It is...” I trailed off. How did this even work?

“Both the bed and sofa are made from the highest-quality materials. There is an office and a shower room, too, and the floor above this one features an equally luxurious bedroom and shower.”

“How wonderful. I did not expect to be able to rest in such luxury this close to enemy territory,” His Majesty said happily.

Curse you, Van. You’re still trying to get in His Majesty’s good graces. You are wiser to the inner workings of the world than I gave you credit for, I thought, furious at my own inability to do what Van could do.

Chapter 7:

The Enemy

IN THE END I HAD TO HAND OVER YOMEIMON TO His Majesty, which meant I needed, yet again, to build more accommodations for myself. Now that I thought about it, most of the nobles here outranked me, which meant there was a decent risk I'd have to give up whatever lodgings I made next. I would have to be more discreet.

I started thinking about a design that wouldn't stand out too much. Specifically, something underground. If I was careful about how and where I built the entrance, nobody would even notice it was there.

I created a set of descending stairs. "If I'm going that far, I should make it nice and big like those underground cities you see near stations in Japan," I mused aloud. "I'll make the passage a straight line so that it's easy to see. Or, wait, should it be more like a labyrinth so any intruders get lost?"

Khamsin, Till, and Arte exchanged glances. Khamsin said, "As Lord Van's protector, a place that's easy to guard would certainly be helpful, but..."

"Um, a labyrinth would be difficult for me to navigate," said Till.

"What if you made it a simple labyrinth?" asked Arte. "For example, by going right at every turn, you can safely reach your destination. That way none of us will get lost."

"Oooh, that's a good idea. Nicely done, Arte." I smiled at her, and she bashfully returned my gaze. Then I got back to work, drawing a simple blueprint on the ground.

As soon as you descended the stairs, you would encounter a forked passageway going three different directions. I would have two more paths branch off from each of those. "I heard somewhere that people often choose left when given the choice, so I'll design the labyrinth so you have to turn right

at each opportunity to arrive at our accommodations. Personally, I'd love to have it so that if you chose the wrong path, you'd get sent to the same room no matter what..."

I thought long and hard about the design, drawing multiple paths on the ground. The others began to think along with me. This time, Till raised her hand to speak. "What if you make it so that if an intruder chooses the wrong path, they get sent in circles? That might make them give up altogether."

What a charming idea! I smiled and nodded. "Right, right. In that case, let's have an alert system that will make a noise every time someone passes through one of the branches. That way if things are looking bad, I can just build a door that won't open, giving us ample time to prepare."

"How will it make a sound?" Till asked, just as Khamsin said, "You mean with string and boards?"

For some reason, Khamsin seemed to be thinking of the sort of security you'd find in old estates belonging to samurai families. Honestly, I wanted to ask him how he even knew about something like that. Did that sort of thing exist in this world?

"Let's go with Khamsin's idea. We can attach strings to the bottom of the boards and have them pass behind the wall and into our rooms all the way in the back. I've never designed anything like that before, but it'd be worth experimenting with for the future, too."

Khamsin nodded, beaming. Till and Arte looked confused, but they agreed nonetheless. *Making new things is so much fun!*

I let my creative juices flow, thinking up all sorts of traps for detecting intruders. Eventually, night was upon us, and I heard the thin metal plates I'd set up on the ceiling collide. Someone had already activated our early detection system.

"Wh-what an incredible sound..." Arte whispered, rubbing her eyes. She must have been half asleep. I watched, smiling, as she walked over to me. Then I sat

on the sofa, stretching my back out.

“Yeah. I modeled them after cymbals, so they ended up louder than I expected.”

“Symbols?” she asked, tilting her head.

“A type of musical instrument that makes loud sounds.” It was the simplest explanation I could think of. Arte nodded seriously.

When I stood up from the sofa, Khamsin made his way over from the entrance. I knew how intense he could be, so I was unsurprised that he was clad in his usual light armor and had his weapon at the ready. “Intruders,” he said.

“Looks like it.” I smirked.

Till stood up from the opposing sofa and looked at me. She was smiling too. “Shall I prepare some tea?”

“That would be lovely. Hot black tea, please!”

“As you wish.” Till bowed and left.



Why were we so relaxed about the situation, you ask? It was because the whole facility had a top-notch security system in place.

When you descended the stairs, you were met with a series of branching paths. The right choices would lead you to our lodgings deep within the labyrinth. These rooms were spacious enough to accommodate ten people comfortably, and they even had dining rooms and toilets for multiple people, plus private rooms for Arte, Dee, and myself. The entrance to this series of rooms had been equipped with a tough door latch, and since we were underground, intruders couldn't bring in any heavyweight objects that could be used to break down the door.

The only way to break through would be with magic, but even that wasn't easy. The door to our accommodations was more than ten centimeters thick. I'd made it from wood blocks, so it wasn't all that heavy, but it was tough as hell.

The detection system rang out a couple more times, but there was no sign of anyone getting anywhere near our rooms. Personally, I wanted to see how far we could push the system, but the intruders were a bit lacking in the infiltration skills department.

"Would this be the third person?" Arte asked.

"It's difficult to tell how many people are breaking in at any given time. Heck, we might've had more than ten visitors by now."

I sipped Till's delicious tea while we all chatted. *Yeah, this is really good. I'd love some cupcakes or something to go with it.*

From the entrance of the room, Lowe said, "Lord Van, it appears that the enemy has arrived at the front door."

"Oh, finally?"

Khamsin's expression tightened. "I will go take a look," he said, going back in the direction he'd arrived from.

"I wonder if they'll be able to get in." I smiled and looked at Arte.

Arte was finally fully awake. She nodded and started moving her pair of dolls.

The sounds of someone or someones trying to destroy the door continued to echo throughout our lodgings. It seemed they had managed to bring some kind of heavy object down with them to try to break down the door. Good luck to them—the door was made from thick wood blocks, and the steel plating was incredibly tough. Not only that, but the longer they spent trying to break in, the more time we had to prepare for them.

The whole system was much more effective as a defensive installation than I thought it would be. I would have to examine its potential further in the future.

“Let’s have the machine bow squad surround the entrance, then place Arte’s dolls right in front of the door to form a sort of wall,” I said quietly. “That way, we’ll be able to take out the enemy without risking any casualties.”

Dee, who was on standby with his sword, nodded firmly and issued further commands to Arb and Lowe. *Come at me*, I thought.

No matter how long we waited, though, it didn’t look like the door would be coming down anytime soon. How much longer were they going to take? I looked around and realized that everyone else appeared to be thinking the same thing. We all exchanged curious glances.

In the end, after ten minutes of waiting, the door remained unmoved. In fact, the invaders vanished entirely. *They must’ve given up*.

“Well, I guess we should be happy this didn’t blow up into something bigger,” I said with a pained grin.

Dee let out a deep sigh and shook his head. “More importantly, I am concerned about their drive. They lacked the conviction to keep trying!”

“Do we *want* them to have that conviction...?” Exasperated, I looked over at the door. “You might be disappointed, but it’s better in the long run if we nobles don’t feud with one another. I certainly have no intention of starting a

grudge match.”

Dee sighed yet again and tilted his chin down. “I understand where you’re coming from, Lord Van, but that line of thinking is naive. It is in times like these that, as a member of the nobility, you must stay resolute and keep the other nobles in check,” he explained in a huff. “That means showing your strength and not taking mercy on those who bare their teeth at you.”

I waved a hand and smiled at him. Loudly, I said, “Ha ha, it’s fine. These guys are small fry. I’ll be okay just ignoring them. Let’s leave them be.”

This time, everyone, not just Dee, cast surprised looks at me. Dee said, “You have such a big heart. Or perhaps this is the kind of composure possessed by those whose strength cannot be rivaled? You truly are something else, Lord Van.”

The rest of the Chivalric Order nodded in agreement. *Guys, come on. Don’t flatter me like that. All I’m really good for is hosting barbecues and putting meat on the table.*

With that silly thought running through my head, I turned to face everyone. “Well, since our intruders have given up, I think it’s time we all get some sleep.”

I woke up rather naturally in the morning, baited by the scent of something delicious. “Mm, good morning,” I said, prompting Till to turn around from the breakfast she was preparing.

She offered me a big smile. “Good morning!”

I tilted my head. “You seem to be in an awfully good mood.”

She giggled and nodded.

“I have not slept well as of late. The lodgings you made for us were more than sufficient, but the threat of monsters or enemy soldiers kept me awake and worried at times...” She looked apologetic for a moment, then lit up with another big, beautiful smile. “But I slept wonderfully here! It’s lovely to be able

to sleep without fear. Now then, since we managed to avoid this whole thing blowing up, how about we have breakfast and head home?"

Till's carefree smile healed my soul. "Wonderful!"

I summoned Arte and Khamsin to come in and have breakfast. Given the risk of carbon monoxide poisoning if we used fire in a closed space, the Chivalric Order had to settle for rations. Fortunately, the ingredients consisted of great dried meat and bread, so nobody complained.

After a quick breakfast, we went outside. Arb, Lowe, and Dee stood at the vanguard position with the machine bow squad in the rear as support. I found it tremendously saddening that I was less afraid of monsters than of the nobles who were supposed to be my allies. Monsters were simple: they came right at you. Nobles, on the other hand, plotted in secret behind closed doors. All their plans seemed to involve poisoning minds and pitting their pawns against each other.

Last night, they'd tried to force their way into my bedroom in a pretty bold fashion. I could probably find the culprits easily enough if I tried...but if I did that, I would make an enemy of daddy dearest. For real this time. On a personal level, I felt it was too soon for that.

With that in mind, I ascended to the surface.

"L-Lord Van," Arb said, prompting me to look up.

I was briefly blinded by the sunlight, so I narrowed my eyes and cast a glance at our surroundings. Which was when I spotted Panamera grinning at me, her arms folded.

"Viscount Panamera, what exactly is going on?" I looked around at my immediate surroundings again.

"Last night, your lodgings were attacked. Is this correct?"

I sighed, hoping to avoid trouble. "Well, someone came to my door and knocked on it pretty forcefully. They never actually came in, so I wouldn't

necessarily say we were attacked...”

Panamera blinked at me, then burst into laughter. “The attack was so feeble you registered it as a casual nighttime visit? I swear, you are dauntless! I wish all nobles were like you!”

I got the distinct sense she had misunderstood me, but before I could say anything, she turned around. A hundred or so shifty-looking men sat on the ground there, surrounded by Panamera’s people. For some reason, they were all glaring at me.

I’m innocent!

Panamera’s joyful smile didn’t waver as she locked the captives in her sights. In a loud voice, she said, “You heard the boy. Baron Van does not even recognize you as assassins. I’m sure this is a serious blow to your self-esteem. Nobody will ever think you competent enough to hire you again. This is your chance to turn over a new leaf. Vow to cooperate with me! The first step in that process is to tell me here and now: which Chivalric Order hid you so that you could infiltrate our ranks?”

The men exchanged glances, but nobody spoke up.

Panamera nodded firmly, then unfolded her arms. “That is the correct attitude for assassins to take. I am growing quite fond of you all!” Her tone was cheerful, even as she drew her sword.

Bathed in the early morning sun, the silver blade reflected a fierce light. All eyes were locked on her weapon.

“It is an assassin’s pride to successfully complete a mission and conceal its details. That pride dictates that none of you name your employer, no matter what. As a show of respect for your loyalty, I will negotiate with each of you, one on one.” Panamera gently swung her sword, grinning widely. “Fear not. As I said, I am fond of you. I will take my time to discuss the matter with each of you in turn.”

Thus began Panamera's one-hundred-person interrogation party.

We could only watch in silence as Panamera interrogated the would-be assassins.

"You. Yes, you," she said with a smile. "You have five seconds to answer each question. I would appreciate quick replies."

The man in question tucked his chin inward, still sitting on the ground. Panamera ignored the look on his face.

"First question. What is your name?"

"...Pacer."

Panamera nodded, apparently pleased to hear the man answer within three seconds. "A great name. I appreciate your cooperation, Pacer. Second question. With which Chivalric Order are you and these men affiliated?"

"I cannot say," Pacer answered, sounding calm. "If I do, we will be killed."

Panamera nodded. "On to my next question." She pierced Pacer's right hand with her sword.

He grunted but otherwise bore the pain in silence. Panamera watched, smiling kindly.

"There is something I find rather curious, Pacer. People often stay silent for fear of being murdered, but in situations like this, they will be killed for their silence anyway. What do you make of that dilemma?"



“If I am to die one way or the other, then I will take the details of my mission to my grave,” Pacer answered, cold sweat rolling down his face.

“Hmm, I respect that. Well, I still have more questions for you, so do try to endure the pain. I’ll be cutting your right hand off next. Please try to stay conscious,” she said gleefully.

Then she resumed her questioning.

In the end, Pacer did not give up any important information. Dee, Arb, and Lowe were still calmly watching the situation unfold, but having seen Arte and Till go pale, I sent them back to our lodgings.

The expressions on the faces of the Seatoh Chivalric Order were complex, to say the least. None of them looked particularly well, but they were all doing their best to remain calm and observe. Well, they’d certainly accumulated some real combat experience by now. I shouldn’t be surprised that they were made of stern stuff.

Khamsin and I, meanwhile, were both surprisingly calm as we watched the interrogation.

“Ah, he died of blood loss.” Panamera smirked. “I’ll be sure to stop the bleeding when I question the next one.”

She turned to the second man. The assassins on the ground all looked pale, and a few were crying from fear. I suspected Panamera would have gotten the answers she sought if she interrogated those individuals first, but instead, she opted for a man who was glaring at her.

“First question. Are you ready?”

As Panamera spoke, about twenty men approached from behind us.
“Viscount Panamera, wait.”

She raised her head, wiped the blood off her sword, and turned her gaze toward two men who walked side by side: one stout and clad in white armor,

and the other shorter, beefier, and dressed in black. Both men wore extravagant capes, marking them as nobles. Each had knights marching behind him, all wearing similarly colored armor—their respective Chivalric Orders.

The shorter man in black armor glared at Panamera. “Please refrain from doing anything that could lower the morale of the other Chivalric Orders. Especially in the middle of such an important battle.”

Panamera smiled and cocked her head. “My, if it isn’t Viscount Tron. How strange! I always heard that, much like myself, you never show mercy to those who oppose you. Have you suddenly learned the concept of benevolence?”

Tron clicked his tongue, furrowing his brow further. “That is not the point. What I am saying is that by conducting such a harsh interrogation behind the scenes of an important battle—a battle in which even His Majesty is participating!—you run the risk of lowering overall morale. You should cease these activities before His Majesty notices.”

As he spoke, both the black-armored knights and the soldiers of the other Chivalric Order visibly tensed. Despite his short stature, this Tron had an imposing presence.

But Panamera ignored his anger, laughing scornfully. “Viscount Tron. Are you trying to sweep this attack on Baron Van’s life under the rug? Imagine if you were the one who was attacked in the middle of the night. Would you waste any time in seeking out the culprits?”

Tron shrugged and shook his head. “It seems to me that, though you are a capable warrior, you fail to understand how the nobility does things. I am saying that this is not the right place for your interrogation. Fear not—I intend to ask Baron Nouveau here to interrogate these assassins. He can drop back to the rear and continue the process in a tent, away from prying eyes.”

The plump man nodded but did not speak. *Tron and Nouveau. I finally have faces to put to the names.*

Panamera hummed. “In that case, could I not interrogate them in Baron Van’s

underground lodgings? It won't take me more than half a day, and nobody will be able to hear anything from the outside."

She wore a defiant grin on her face. Tron and Nouveau's gazes sharpened, but they could think of no way to protest.

Just then, the knights behind Tron and Nouveau split off to either side, clearing a path. Panamera, Tron, and Nouveau noticed. When they turned around, they saw His Majesty approaching with his royal guard.

"What is this?" he asked in a low, annoyed voice.

Both Tron and Nouveau dropped to one knee. Tron stared at the ground, looking particularly shaken. "Y-Your Majesty!"

The king glanced down at Tron's head, then turned his attention to me. "Oh, if it isn't Baron Van! I slept wonderfully thanks to that astonishing gate of yours. In fact, I would love to have you build something similar in the capital."

"It pleases me to hear that, Your Majesty. I imagine you will be using it for a while, so if anything comes up, please do not hesitate to let me know." I bowed slightly, feeling like a merchant offering a warranty on his product.

Soon thereafter, His Majesty noticed the bloody corpse on the ground near Panamera. "What happened here?" He looked at Panamera sharply. "Explain."

She sheathed her sword. "Last night, Baron Van's lodgings were attacked. He seemed to register the intruders as unwelcome visitors, so he paid them no mind, but this marks the second nighttime attack against Baron Van during this march. As his ally, I cannot allow this to go unpunished, so I have captured his attackers."

His Majesty's gaze sharpened even further. "He came under attack twice? I see. In other words, these are the actions of someone who knows that Baron Van is one of our trump cards. Only one of the orders marching with us could so accurately pinpoint Baron Van's whereabouts..." He harrumphed. "I did not expect anyone among us to provide aid to Yelenetta."

Despite his clear anger, His Majesty presented his theory calmly. I saw him clock the fact that Tron and Nouveau had begun to tremble in fear.

He turned to address Panamera. “And so you, Viscount Tron, and Baron Nouveau have been conducting an interrogation?”

Panamera shook her head. “No. Viscount Tron and Baron Nouveau took issue with my approach. I was told to back down and allow Baron Nouveau to take over somewhere else, out of sight.”

“I beg your pardon?” His Majesty frowned. “Regardless of your tactics, you are Baron Van’s singular sworn ally. You have every right to conduct the interrogation yourself. What issue could anyone possibly take with that?”

This smooth transition into discussing the two noblemen made the whole conversation feel perfectly scripted. I was beginning to suspect that His Majesty and Panamera had discussed it ahead of time.

I looked over at Panamera, who shot me a meaningful smile.

I knew it! I love how reliable she is, but man, she is terrifying!

Chapter 8:

Interrogations Are Terrifying

UNEASILY, TRON SAID, "I MERELY FELT APPREHENSIVE about conducting such a ghastly interrogation in the midst of a battle you were helming yourself, Your Majesty. Especially because it could affect troop morale..."

Panamera snorted. "Now that I think about it, the last time Baron Van was attacked, it was Baron Nouveau's Chivalric Order that was on patrol duty. I wonder who was on patrol last night? We must find the answer as soon as possible."

Nouveau swallowed audibly, sweat rolling down his forehead. Tron raised his head to look at His Majesty. "W-wait! It sounds like Viscount Panamera has suspected Baron Nouveau since the beginning! Can we really trust any information she acquires? What if she is connected to Yelenetta in some way?"

"Then what would you have me do?" His Majesty asked.

"In consideration of Baron Van's well-being, I would suggest having someone of a higher rank conduct the interrogation."

"I see," said the king, looking troubled. "Very well. However, Baron Van has not been a lord for long. His only close tie among the nobility is Viscount Panamera."

Tron said hastily, "In that case, I recommend Marquis Fertio. After all, Baron Van is his son. What better ally could he have?" He said this as if it were an exceptionally good idea. His Majesty and Panamera exchanged a brief glance.

"A tremendous suggestion. As you say, they are father and son. In that case, let us proceed quickly. Somebody summon Marquis Fertio!"

One of his nearby guards ran to call for Jalpa. Seeing this, I realized what Panamera's goal was and had to resist the urge to scream.

This had been all been planned to draw Jalpa out from the get-go. That was why His Majesty had brought up Yelenetta, despite the goal of the attacks on me still being unclear. The reason His Majesty's words had felt off was that his true objective was to make Tron and Nouveau feel they were in danger. If things proceeded along this path, they would both be convicted of treason and potentially sentenced to death. Tron and Nouveau, as His Majesty predicted, had sensed they were losing control and begun to panic.

For my part, I had no desire to turn up the heat on daddy dearest. At least not yet. I still had preparations to make before I tried that. But this secret game had begun so suddenly that I no longer had any control over what came next. How far were His Majesty and Panamera planning to take this?

Eventually, Jalpa arrived with Stradale, the commander of his Chivalric Order. His fury was plain for all to see, and his icy glare tore Tron and Nouveau to shreds. They prostrated themselves, their faces ashen.

As I observed this, it dawned on me that Tron and Nouveau might have acted on their own. It was just a hunch...but I suspected I wasn't far off the mark. Of course, daddy dearest was probably at least involved with the first attack and the destruction of my container. And if so, His Majesty would not overlook it.

I kept a close eye on Jalpa, wondering what would happen next.

His Majesty turned to daddy dearest. "Thank you for coming, Marquis Fertio," he said, sounding a bit irritable.

Jalpa had to respond obediently. "Of course! Might I ask what the matter is?" He likely had a decent idea of what was going on here but was choosing to act ignorant. I wasn't sure how His Majesty felt about that, but he nodded as though everything was fine.

"Mm, it is a bit of a long story," His Majesty said, prompting Panamera to grin and raise her hand.

“If it pleases you, I will explain the situation.”

“That would be wonderful.”

Panamera walked Jalpa through the events. Jalpa shot the assassins a resentful glare. “It is shameful,” he said angrily, “to attack someone in their sleep! I will see to their interrogation myself and get to the truth of the matter!”

A look of open relief washed over Tron and Nouveau. For noblemen, they sure did wear their hearts on their sleeves.

Unfortunately for them, Panamera was not so lenient. “No, no, Marquis Fertio. I couldn’t possibly trouble you with something like an interrogation. And besides, as Baron Van’s sole ally, I believe myself best suited to perform this task.”

Jalpa choked back whatever he was about to say. He could probably brute-force his way through this, but it would raise questions about his behavior—a dangerous risk to take in front of His Majesty. However, if Panamera performed the interrogation, Tron and Nouveau’s plot would eventually come to light, and that in turn would raise suspicions about Jalpa. If His Majesty dangled a death sentence in front of Tron and Nouveau, they might well talk, and Jalpa would find himself driven into a corner. With only these two options to choose from, it was obvious which he would take.

Just as I anticipated, Jalpa decided to brute-force his way through. “Viscount Panamera, I am grateful for your friendship with Baron Van. However, please consider my position as a father, knowing that my own son was attacked.” He stepped toward Panamera, glared at her, and said in a low, menacing voice, “Leave this to me.”

Panamera widened her eyes and observed Jalpa’s expression for a few seconds. Finally she let out a breathy laugh and shrugged. “I suppose I have no choice. I had no idea that you cared so deeply for your son! I would love to share this heartwarming tale with my friends.” Leaving him to chew on those

words, she walked over to me. “Baron Van, are you amenable to your father handling the interrogation?”

She was giving me the final say in the matter. His Majesty was looking at me too, his lips quirking up at the corners.

I sighed and glanced at Jalpa. Never in my life had I seen that expression on his face. “Father... Marquis Fertio. I would like you to handle the interrogation.”

Jalpa looked shocked. Tron and Nouveau both sank to the floor. I watched them carefully, then turned to His Majesty and Panamera. The king was looking at me with great interest, while Panamera looked furious.

I see. Panamera must have come up with this idea. I don't know how eager the king was about it, but at least I don't seem to have pissed him off.

Relieved, I turned back to Jalpa, who observed me in silence. I gave him my best, most natural smile. “I am counting on you, Father,” I said, bowing my head.

He frowned and tucked his chin in.



As soon as we were in a different location, Panamera began to question me. “Why did you choose Marquis Fertio? Surely you understood the purpose of all of this?”

His Majesty had returned to the front lines, and Jalpa had relocated to my underground lodgings in the name of conducting his interrogation. The only people around us were those connected to Panamera and me.

I contemplated the best way to answer her, but before I could say anything, Arte spoke up. She wore a troubled expression and her voice carried a strong hint of concern. “Um, perhaps he could not find it in his heart to do something that might lead to his father’s punishment?” she suggested.

Panamera shook her head. “Foolishness. We noblemen and noblewomen must show no mercy to those who would harm us. The moment our enemies think us weak, it’s over. That is common sense. In our world, to let our decisions be swayed by emotion is to let our houses collapse. Are you okay with that?”

I gave her a taut smile and a slight nod. “Personally, I don’t want to walk such a bloody path. But having said that, I also have no intention of letting my house collapse.” Then I smirked. “And I was most certainly not swayed by my emotions.”

“What?” Panamera narrowed her eyes.

“I intend to deal with my enemies in my own way. A way that will leave them regretting the day they thought to challenge me.”

Panamera’s eyes went wide and she blinked at me. The displeasure began to drain from her expression. “That sounds fascinating, but I would appreciate it if you followed our lead every now and then.” She lowered her voice to a whisper. “The plan was to keep Marquis Fertio’s house in check and increase the authority of both yours and mine.”

Ah, so Panamera had been scheming behind the scenes. The nobility often engaged in power struggles when their nations weren’t growing territorially or

economically. When one person acquired land, another lost theirs; when one person was promoted to a key office, another was demoted. Panamera was clearly gunning for Marquis Fertio's territory and influence, because he had grown too strong for his own good.

That aligned with His Majesty's aims of keeping the royal family in power, too. It was precisely because His Majesty sought to expand the country with one large push that Marquis Fertio's house, known for its skill in war, had received such favorable treatment. Marquis Fertio had increased his own authority during that period, and even with his territorial expansion having come to a halt, people still flocked around him without him needing to so much as lift a finger. Other nobles, large businesses, powerful knights, and even mages came to him in hopes of serving him.

That was how Marquis Fertio's house had gained power above its station. His Majesty sought to put an end to that. Meanwhile, Panamera, thought to be a member of Count Ferdinatto's faction, wanted to bring down big bad Jalpa to propel herself up through the ranks. I figured that about summed up Panamera and the king's positions. I felt bad, but being the victim, I intended to do things my way.

Panamera sighed and shrugged again. "Are you going back home, then? I expect it will take us only half a month or month or so to bring down the enemy fortress."

I nodded. "I'm headed home," I said resolutely. "The trip back probably won't even take me half a month, and I really want a bath." These words came from the bottom of my heart. I had no desire to linger any further on this sad, bloody battlefield. Given the choice, of course I'd pick the warm bed, bath, and delicious food that Seatoh Village promised me.

Panamera looked pained but nodded. "I expected as much. Until we meet again, Baron Van. The next time I see you, it will be to deliver news of our triumphant victory, so you had better prepare your finest delicacies."

She departed gallantly, every inch the hero on her way toward the battlefield. There was truly no one like Panamera.

After I'd watched my reliable friend depart, I turned to my people. "All right! Who wants to head home for real this time?"

My words were met with cheers.

Because I'd paved most of the mountain road, we got home in a third of the time it took us to reach the border in the first place. At first I was worried about monster attacks on the way back, but Ortho and the adventurers agreed to guard us for cheap, and we got back to Seatoh Village without fielding a single attack.

Esparda and the others came out to greet us. "Lord Van, welcome home."

"It's great to be back, Esparda!"

I took the first chance I could get to wash off all the sweat in a nice hot bath. By the time I was out, we were ready for the big barbecue.

Wait, who even gave the order for that???

Before I could really ponder this, I found myself standing in front of a fire, a skewer of meat in my hands and the people of Seatoh Village grinning all around me. "Well then," I said, "in celebration of the Seatoh Chivalric Order's safe return, let the barbecue begin!"

Everyone erupted in cheers. I still had no idea how the barbecue had even happened, but I went with the flow as everyone turned their meat skewers toward the flames. In an instant, the delicious aroma of top-grade meat filled the air, putting the citizens of Seatoh Village in high spirits.

"Let's eat!"

"Yeah!"

Once their meat was cooked, the people of Seatoh Village dug in. Our humble

village's main street—the venue for our massive barbecue—was lively with cheers, laughter, and merriment.

“This is delicious, Lord Van,” Arte commented at my side. She was tucking into her share of meat and fruit.

I nodded, still a bit bewildered. “It is, but...how did this all come together? Who got the ball rolling?”

Arte blinked, seeming surprised. “Huh? I had heard that you planned to hold a big barbecue.”

I offered her an ambiguous nod. “Ah, I see... Someone was extra thoughtful and pushed the plan forward.” I kept nodding, then brought some of that perfectly cooked meat to my mouth.

Mm, delicious. This special Van sauce is the best.

With that done, I got to work on the various jobs and tasks that had accumulated in my absence.

“Lord Van! Our population has increased by a thousand people! We need more housing!”

“Lord Van! The dwarves are going on about wanting to smith orichalcum weapons!”

“Lord Van! We can't sell off all the monster parts we've acquired, so the guild is sending us some personnel to help sort through and ship everything!”

I tried to manage this chaotic deluge of demands and opinions.

“I suppose families of three or more should get their own houses. I feel bad, but single people and couples will have to settle for shared housing.”

“We haven't gotten any more orichalcum from Ladavesta, right? Wait, we have? In that case, tell the dwarves I'd love a cool spear.”

“I'm grateful for the Business Guild's help, but how much should I pay their

personnel...? A single gold per month?! That's crazy expensive! Let's try compromising on a single gold for two people. If that's no good, send a letter to Apollo telling him we'll talk to the Mary Chamber of Commerce instead!"

Three days of running around went by this way, with meals being my only downtime. Those breaks didn't last long, either, because after dinner I was treated to Dee's beaming smile and Esparda's stony face while they trained me. By the time I was able to go to bed, I was dead on my feet.

I'm so tired. Maybe I should've just stayed at the border where the fighting was, I thought, half-floating in the huge bathhouse that I was using all by myself.

"You have done well, Lord Van," Khamsin said politely. I felt like crying.

"What do I have left? The apkallu issued a request for lodging in the water, and the Bell & Rango Company wants more storage facilities. Oh, and there was that request for more roads in the village." I counted each job on my fingers and felt even more like crying. "Housing in the water... I mean, I'd love to go all out and make a shrine or something at the bottom of the lake, but diving underwater to do that would be tough. What if I wore a goldfish bowl or something and had the kids pull me down? No, they'd definitely try to prank me..."

Hearing me mutter about each new idea that entered my mind, Khamsin remembered something. "Oh! I totally forgot, but there was a request from the Esparda Chivalric Order to expand the adventurers' town!"

"What?! They make it sound so simple! That'll take me a week or two, at least!" I complained.

"The fact that you can do it even that quickly is surprising," Khamsin replied, looking exasperated.

I kept whining, even as I opened up a mental map of the town. "The biggest problem is that I built the town over the road. It's surrounded by the forest just ahead of the Wolfsbrook Mountain Range, and in the opposite direction the

land slopes upward. If I'm going to expand it, I'll have to start by leveling the ground."

Khamsin snapped to attention again. "Oh, right! I forgot to tell you, but we've been cutting down trees in that forest, so the land there has already been cultivated! What if we expanded the town in that direction?" He started waving his hands all over the place. "So this is Seato Village, right? Then over here is the adventurers' town, and...it would be here! There are no trees around here!"

This explanation sent me into a misery spiral. "W-wow, awesome. Guess I'll expand the town, then..."

"Great!"

FYI: after my bath, Till's special ice-cold fruit water was delicious.

Anyway, I made the Bell & Rango Company some new storage space right away, since that job was high priority. I built it with a basement this time around, which would help with the whole real estate shortage problem we were currently having. "You guys should be good for a while. I'm counting on you to handle things with the Business Guild, okay?"

"Understood!" Rango beamed.

"Thank you so much," Bell cut in. It was like he'd been waiting for this moment. "Truth be told, we have a few more requests to attend to, so if you don't mind, we'd like to go over them now..."

He spoke politely, but his eyes were bloodshot. I could feel the flurry of requests coming, but I was too busy to handle whatever he had for me. "Ah, sorry, I actually have to go expand the town now."

"What?"

"Right now?"

They stared at me, chewed over my words for a moment, then looked at one another. Finally, they turned back to me.

“Where?” Bell demanded. “Are you expanding it ahead of where the town starts?”

“If you’ve acquired new land, we would love to set up shop on some of it!” said Rango.

They advanced on me in their excitement. Apparently I had lit fires in their merchant hearts. “I’m expanding the town toward the Wolfsbrook Mountain Range. For now, I plan to dismantle part of the wall and double the size of the town.”

“Double?!” they said in unison. Apparently, their excitement had doubled too.

I understood their reactions. The number of adventurers and visitors coming through Seatoh Village was increasing by the day. In terms of people moving here permanently, we were looking at five hundred new residents per month; with adventurers, we saw monthly gains of a thousand people. Those adventurers often came on jobs and then left for the next town, but the percentage of those who eventually came back to Seatoh Village was actually very high, or so I was told. The population of the village was soaring. By this point, most of the folks from neighboring villages had also moved to Seatoh Village, pleased that we had lots of jobs and housing to boot.

Amidst all of this, the Bell & Rango Company was growing at a speed that was, quite frankly, insane. Unfortunately, that also meant they had a huge shortage of personnel, which was causing problems. But little Van had his own issues to deal with! In fact, things were so busy that he was considering learning some kind of technique to enable him to create shadow clones of himself!

The main roadblock there, of course, was that little Van had no clue how to go about learning such a technique. Teehee.

At this point, all I could really do was prioritize the jobs that came in and get things done to the best of my ability. “I’m aiming to expand the town so it can house another three thousand adventurers and merchants. And His Majesty will probably return shortly, so I want to have this done by the time he gets back.”

“Hmm,” said Bell. “I guess I should refrain from making any further requests. At least for now. I’ll speak with you another day.”

“Kay!” I replied gently.

I said my goodbyes to Bell and Rango, grabbed Khamsin, and left the adventurers’ town to go check out the construction site. It wasn’t long before a group of people caught up to us.

“Lord Van! Please wait!”

It was Paula and her machine bow squad. Even little Porte, the squad’s youngest member, was with them. It looked like they’d come in a hurry; only ten members were present, and they were all equipped with light armor, machine bows, and short swords.

“It is dangerous outside, so we will protect you!”

As happy as Paula’s heroic words made me, they also led me to feel conflicted. “No, no, no. You guys must be exhausted from that long march. You need to rest.”

Paula shot me an exasperated look. “I could say the same to you. I heard you haven’t rested at all since we returned. The villagers and the adventurers are all worried about you.”

“Wait, really?” *Ah, man. I guess this comes with being so popular,* I thought bashfully.

Paula nodded. She wore the most serious expression she could muster. “Of course. If anything were to happen to you, Seatoh Village would be finished. We can’t yet construct buildings or make weapons on our own. Without you, this village does not exist.” Then she smiled sunnily.

I was a bit wounded to hear that my only value was in making things, but I kept that to myself. I would just cry into my pillow that night instead. With a sigh, I asked, “In that case, can you guys come with us?”

“As you wish!”

Paula and the others saluted me. Everyone had mastered the formalities that came with being in a Chivalric Order, including wee little Porte. The fruit of their hard training, no doubt.

Still, I wished they would show as much consideration for my wounded heart and soul. Little Van was the type of child who thrived on praise!

Upon our arrival at the construction site, I confirmed that most of the wooded area had in fact been cultivated. All the tree stumps really make me feel like I'd come to a forestry site. The area was also much bigger than I'd anticipated.

"I can't believe we've cut down so many trees," I whispered. "We're destroying nature."

"How so? You can find trees anywhere," Khamsin replied. He looked confused.

I see. It was true: either the human population of this world was much smaller than my old one, or this world's natural areas were much more vast. It was normal here to traverse long, winding roads sandwiched between deep woods and mountains before finally arriving at a population center. Going to a neighboring town or village took a few days at best, and at worst it could take several weeks for a round trip. That was the world I now lived in.

In that case, maybe it wasn't such a big deal that we'd cut down all these trees.

Okay, I won't let it bother me. I tried very hard to convince myself of this before I turned my attention back to the forestry site.

Because I'd built the adventurers' town along the road, expanding toward the Wolfsbrook Mountain Range would give it a strange shape. Viewed from above, it'd look like a messy "L."

"What should I do about this?" I mused aloud, staring at the tree trunks. Next to me, Khamsin's expression grew troubled and he groaned. "Yes, the high

ground would be favorable for battle...”

“Are you talking about defensive measures? I swear, you’re always thinking about combat.”

Khamsin can be such a kid sometimes, I thought, smiling. But then a new image materialized in my mind.

It was true that most battles came down to one side trying to take the high ground. If you could shower your enemies with arrows or stones from above, it was tremendously difficult for them to fight back. Even in close-quarters combat, fighting from below was tricky. So maybe Khamsin’s perspective on this was actually great. The big problem was the town’s proximity to Seatoh Village, but if I designed it to function as the village’s defensive line, I could kill two birds with one stone.

In other words, I could build the town such that hostile forces would be unable to target Seatoh Village directly. Then I could fortify both the Wolfsbrook Mountain Range side and the main road side for offense.

With that settled, I just needed to figure out what form this would all take and how tall I should build it. I’d make the wall around the adventurer town about twenty meters tall. The wall facing the village would be five meters, so if enemy forces ever managed to occupy the town, they wouldn’t get the high ground. Just to be safe. *Now I just need to figure out the form factor...*

Another important consideration was land use. If I used as much of the cultivated land as possible, the town would end up shaped like a magatama. That’d be a little odd, and I’d prefer to have it conform to Seatoh Village’s design.

It was with those thoughts swirling through my head that I struck upon an idea. Seatoh Village was a hexagram, so what if I designed the town like a crescent moon? Back in my old world, lots of nations, like Turkey and Malaysia, had moons and stars on their flags, but nobody had designed villages or towns in those shapes. I was pretty sure, anyway.

Okay, it was time for measurements. I turned around toward Paula and the others. “We need to do some prep. First, let’s make a simple map.”

“Okay!”

Despite some mild confusion over what was happening, Paula and her troops responded enthusiastically. They had no way of knowing how massive this operation would ultimately be.

I looked down from above, listing everything that came to mind. “Hmm, Paula should probably be a little more to the right. And then the whole thing should be bigger— No, we’ll be fine if we put the wall on the outside of where we placed the marker.”

Khamsin, down on the ground, directed traffic as loudly as he could. “Paula! A little more to the right, please!”

Paula and the others responded quickly to our instructions, holding their round iron shields all the while.

I’d started by building a chunk of twenty-meter-high wall at the far end of the construction zone. That way, I could stand on the wall and use the machine bow squad as human markers for where I would build the rest of the town. Unfortunately, the process was proving more difficult than I expected; the distance made things tricky, and that prevented me from arranging my human markers in a clean curve.

“I feel like the rear is getting smaller,” I said aloud.

“Huh?” said Arte. She and Till had brought us tea and snacks. “Oh, you’re right. And I imagine the wall itself will end up different, too.” Arte had been much more proactive in expressing her own thoughts and feelings lately.

“Yeah. We’re not directly above it, so it’s hard to judge the size of things that far away. What should I do...?” I sipped my tea, working through the problem in my brain. We’d already spent an hour taking measurements, and I was starting

to feel bad for Paula and her team. “Should I gather another twenty or so people?”

Just then, I heard a loud voice from down below. “What? Is someone calling for me?”

I almost looked straight down, but quickly suppressed the urge. Peeking down a twenty-meter wall was terrifying. I hadn’t built any kind of railing yet, so I crawled forward slowly and looked over the edge.

“Lord Van! Do you need any help?”

“Huh? Dee? What brings you here?”

Below were Dee, Arb, Lowe, and a pack of twenty-odd other people. When we returned from the march, I’d told them to take turns resting for a week, but here they all were, clad in light armor.

Abruptly, Dee vanished from sight.

“Lord Van!”

“Whoa! You scared me!”

I took my eyes off him for a second and he came running up the wall. It surprised the crap out of me; I was still on all fours.

“Running up this wall will prove to be excellent training!” Dee panted. “Might I request stairs?”

“You’re really going to use them for training?” I decided then and there to install an elevator in the wall. If I let him have his way, he’d run up and down until he collapsed. “Well, either way, I’m glad you guys are here. Think you can lend me a hand?”

Dee grinned and nodded. “Leave it to us! I asked Sir Esparda to watch the village, so take all the time you need!”

“You’re a lifesaver.” I smirked, seeing Dee raring to go, then offered my silent gratitude to everyone who had come to help, even though it meant

squandering their vacation time. I was blessed with incredible friends and allies.

Final Chapter: Summoned Again

A WEEK WENT BY, AND WE COMPLETED WORK ON the new exterior wall. As planned, it drew a lovely arc. Not too shabby, if I said so myself. With Esparda helping out after we'd finished taking measurements, constructing the wall was almost too easy.

Now it was time to remove the existing wall and think about where the new buildings would go. I enjoyed planning out towns, so I was having a blast figuring out what sorts of buildings and facilities we would need.

That was when a messenger arrived on horseback.

"Lord Van!" Khamsin said. "A messenger from the border has arrived!"

"Whoa, did we win already?" I stopped what I was doing to follow him back to the messenger. "Ugh, don't tell me they just stormed the fortress knowing they'd take heavy casualties. That puts a bad taste in my mouth."

"I suppose we will find out soon enough."

As we approached the messenger, a knight, I noticed something off about him. *This isn't good news.*

He knelt. "Baron Van, I come bearing a letter from His Majesty."

"Thank you very much." I took the letter and read it over, unintentionally muttering as I went. "Hmm... Hmm?"

"What does it say?" Khamsin asked in a concerned tone.

"Well, it looks like we won, for what it's worth. The enemy deployed wyverns and medium-sized dragons, but since we had our best mages with us, we defeated them. The only issue is that it was a fierce battle. Ylenetta's army didn't retreat until their fortress was in tatters."

“I see. Then this is a victory report?”

“Well, actually...” I could only offer Khamsin a vague reply as I read over the letter again. “It looks like His Majesty wants to reuse the enemy fortress? Since the battle is over, he’s requesting that I come back.”

“He wants you to repair the fortress?” A trace of anger crossed Khamsin’s face.

I tilted my head. “Hey, what’s wrong?”

Khamsin glanced at the knight, then looked back at me seriously. In a bitter whisper, he said, “I understand that he is the sovereign of this nation, but I still think His Majesty is requesting too much of you. You’ve made roads, lodgings, bases, and fortresses, and yet...”

The knight’s eyes widened. Khamsin was committing lese-majeste. This was bad, no matter how you sliced it. I panicked, putting a hand on Khamsin’s shoulder to calm him.

“It’s fine, Khamsin! Calm down. I’m grateful that His Majesty asks so much of me. He’s summoning me because this is something only I can do, and depending on the scale of the fortress, it’ll probably only take me a month or two to repair.” I smiled at Khamsin, then turned to the knight. “I know my attendant here said some funny things, but he wasn’t complaining about His Majesty. He’s just overflowing with love for his master, you see. He can be overly passionate at times.”

I followed this up with a dry laugh. The knight nodded, his expression difficult to read. I would be thrilled if he stayed quiet about the whole situation...

Oh, right! I could bribe him!

“Thank you so much for delivering this letter. We’ll prepare you a nice hot bath and a meal at once; please enjoy yourself.” By showering him with comfort, I hoped to make the knight feel as though he owed me. “Khamsin, if you would?”

“Understood.”

I wasn't sure how Khamsin felt about any of this, but for the moment, he gave me a proper bow and led the knight away.

Khamsin loved me too much. Popularity sure was a double-edged sword.

Dismissing these silly thoughts, I summoned Dee and Esparda so we could discuss the letter.

“...So that's what happened.”

Having heard me explain the letter's contents, Dee and Esparda both went quiet. They looked troubled. I was confused—was it really that serious?—but I waited for one of them to speak.

Eventually, they raised their heads in unison, like someone had given them a signal. Then they exchanged looks. “Can we assume he is earnestly requesting that Lord Van make repairs to the fortress?” Dee asked.

Esparda groaned and tipped his head forward. “Even if part of the fortress was heavily damaged, that would only be true of the side facing Scuderia. As long as the walls and buildings facing Yelenetta are fine, then they should have no problem reusing the fortress. All things considered, there are two ways of thinking about this.”

“And they are?” I asked automatically. *He's such a darn good conversationalist!*

He cleared his throat and continued. “The first is that His Majesty wishes to create opportunities for you to distinguish yourself. Even as an outsider, it is clear to me that His Majesty places great value on you. Perhaps, by having you repair the fortress and equip it with ballistae, he's trying to give you a chance to demonstrate significant achievements. If so, you will be granted the title of viscount. Perhaps even something higher.”

I had mixed feelings about that. “What else?”

“The fastest way to get to the fortress is from Seatoh Village. His Majesty may intend to carve out that chunk of Yelenetta’s territory and give it to you.”

“What?!” I shouted. Esparda’s explanation took me completely by surprise. Seriously, an amazing conversationalist! “I mean, as a nobleman, it’s great to get more territory, but that’s not really my ambition. I’m happy with what I have. Heck, not only have we got hot springs, but also a swanky hotel, restaurants, the works. Every month new businesses open. And we have a beautiful lake where we can ride boats! At this point, if we can open a place selling cakes, crepes, ice cream, and Belgian waffles, I’d be thrilled... Oh, and a delicious bakery and a ramen joint. Those would be wonderful, too.”

My intent was to express to them how satisfied I was with my current situation, but I took an accidental detour into all the different sweets I wanted to eat. *Food really is the spice of life. I’d love some curry. Just thinking about it is making me hungry!*



Esparda put a hand on his chin and sunk back into thought.

“Uh, I’m not actually complaining, mind you!” I said hurriedly. “But if His Majesty does offer me more land, I will try to turn him down at least once.”

Esparda nodded a little. “I was thinking about the requests you just laid out, actually. This might be a perfect opportunity.”

“What do you mean?”

A grave expression came over his face. “Yelenetta is in a region that makes it easy to trade with the Central Continent, and it is said that the food culture over there is highly advanced. It is safe to assume that Yelenetta has easy access to a number of spices and ingredients that are unavailable to us.”

“...Give me the deets.”

We zipped back to the border with twenty war wagons, eventually spotting the Scuderian army doing repairs on the area around the fortress. From what I could see, they’d given up working on the wall or the buildings and were instead removing the chunks of the structure that had fallen to the ground, along with the corpses of enemy troops, horses, and dragons.

This must have been one heck of a battle. The terrain had changed considerably since I left.

As soon as I spoke to the soldier stationed at the fortress entrance, he yelled, “Baron Van Nei Fertio has arrived!” and dashed off.

Uh, should I follow him? Should I wait here?

I resisted the urge to wander away, opting instead to pass the time by looking at my surroundings. Before long, His Majesty and the other nobles exited a building further back in the fortress that was still intact.

“Welcome, Baron Van!” His Majesty approached me jovially, both arms in the air. “Thanks to your efforts, we were able to safely take down the enemy

fortress!” Behind him, I saw Count Ferdinatto and Viscount Panamera smiling, and daddy dearest looking like he’d just swallowed a bug.

I took Dee, Khamsin, and Arb with me, then bowed deeply. “Congratulations on your spectacular victory, Your Majesty. I knew that you would triumph.”

“Oho, how uncharacteristically kind of you! Are you upset that I called you back?”

His Majesty was reading way too much into my polite greeting. I shook my head, a smile still plastered on my face. “Absolutely not. I am overjoyed that you have been victorious.”

He harrumphed. “Something is off about your demeanor, but I will accept your words at face value.”

Rude! I was totally not trying to play the loyal subject just to receive some land on the border. *Now c’mon and give me my land!*

I kept smiling brightly at His Majesty, and behind him I heard Panamera trying to stifle laughter. She sounded a lot like a balloon losing its air.

So rude. Is she gunning for this land, too? Fine, then we’ll settle this like warriors... Through a game of rock, paper, scissors!

His Majesty cleared his throat then, casting his gaze at the fortress. “As I’m sure you have surmised, I called you here for a very specific reason. You can see that this fortress underwent severe damage in the battle. We expect Ylenetta to deploy a significant force to reclaim it because it’s an important halfway point in their defenses. They might even request backup from the Central Continent. We must ensure this fortress can withstand such an attack.”

He turned his eyes back to me.

“There is no way to know how soon Ylenetta will return. This will be a dangerous worksite, but it is currently our top priority. Baron Van, will you take this job?”

The moment I was sure he had finished speaking, I said, “Your Majesty, I, Van

Nei Fertio, will risk life and limb to build you the most powerful fortress that has ever existed!”

That must’ve earned me, like, a hundred loyalty points, right?

“...I see. I did not expect you to oblige so quickly. I will not forget your self-sacrificing devotion, Baron Van.”

Little Van’s hardcore loyalty was enough to surprise even His Majesty! He gave me a slight nod and turned to the nobles behind him.

“You have heard the baron! Half of you will remain here to help reconstruct and strengthen the fortress! I will announce achievements and rewards at the palace at a later date. Understood?”

“Yes, Your Majesty!” everyone answered.

Given how quickly they got moving, they must have been assigned jobs before I arrived. I watched them from the corner of my eye while His Majesty and Panamera approached me.

“So...what are you plotting?” the king asked.

But loyal little Van shook his head. “Plotting? Your Majesty, please, I wish only to devote my body and spirit to your cause.”

“Enough! Speak the truth. You are always the first to voice your displeasure when the opportunity arises, and I know how much you hate the battlefield.”

More rudeness! My poker face is my greatest asset! I went silent for a moment, contemplating the best way to answer, and Panamera grinned meaningfully.

“I imagine he intends to make a request of you, Your Majesty. He is attempting to display his loyalty.”

“I see...” His Majesty said with a frown. “But you are acting so strangely that it puts me off, Van. Speak freely, as you always have.”

Given no other choice, I laid my soul bare. “Your Majesty, I want to construct

a fortress city here. Please give it to me.”

“Oh. I did not expect you to be so direct.”

What? Why was he giving me that look when he’d told me to speak the truth?

Meanwhile, Panamera grinned deviously. “It is common knowledge how much you hate combat, so why would you put so much stock in this fortress? I am sure you understand how fierce the combat here will be.”

Little Van was still in full honesty mode. “I want to acquire rare goods from the Central Continent. For that to happen, Your Majesty will have to occupy Yelenetta’s coast. By making this into an invincible fortress city, I can help with that process.”

Cakes, crepes, curry rice... All the foods I craved ran through my head, putting a creepy smile on my face. Considering the ferocious grins that His Majesty and Panamera were shooting me, it was safe to say that they misread my signals.

“I see,” said His Majesty. “I wondered how to motivate someone like you who desires neither social standing nor fortune, but it was simpler than I thought.”

Panamera nodded. “Your drive to see the unseen overrides even your hatred of war. Interesting.”

Actually, I just want to eat tasty foods. When I said rare goods, I meant ingredients and spices and stuff.

But they kept nodding and smiling those menacing smiles. “I cannot wait to see what new weapons he develops.”

“Agreed, Your Majesty.”

“Wait, wait, wait,” I protested, “I’m not an arms dealer. I’m just the lord of a little border village.”

They burst into laughter, ignoring me entirely.

Side Story: One More Thing

THE WOLFSBROOK MOUNTAIN RANGE WAS A SERIES OF mountains connected to one another, some large and some small. The center of the range had high elevation, of course, but even on the edges you periodically found tall mountains shooting into the sky like spikes. The military march was already a quarter of the way through the mountains, but we were only two days into our journey.

Thanks to the large monsters that frequented the area, the game trail was wide enough for two carriages to pass through side by side. For the most part, the tall trees and steep mountains obstructed the wide blue sky, but it was visible just beyond the sloped road. As soon as travelers saw it, their dispositions grew bright to match.

“The Wolfsbrook Mountain Range doesn’t end after that hill, does it?” I asked, half joking.

Till grimaced and shook her head. “I do not believe it does.”

“Yeah, I figured,” I said with a dry laugh.

Despite our march having only just begun, little Van was fed up with the whole endeavor. After all, my butt hurt, and the only things to look at were trees, mountains, and cliffs. Thanks to Till and the others, the food was delicious, but I was getting bored. I thought about making some weapons, but producing more luggage would only make things harder on the horses, and it would slow down the march.

I looked up at the bajillionth tree before turning my gaze to the sky over the hill. “Well, this is our first time seeing the sky in a day, so if we find a good spot, let’s take a break.”

Arte nodded happily. “That is a wonderful idea. It would be fun to stop for

some rest with such a nice view.”

Khamsin nodded too. Seemed like everyone was of one mind. Till watched our reactions and smiled warmly. “It might take some time, but I can prepare some delicious black tea.”

That prompted Khamsin to stand. “Then I’ll inform Commander Dee that we will take a break.”

As we crested the hill, we saw a perfect spot to set up our tents. Based on the terrain, it seemed like a large dragon or crocodile might have used the space as a bed, but I decided not to let that get to me. For now, I just had to set up some accommodations, and then we could rest once I did that.

More important than any of that was the sight unfolding before me. “Talk about a panoramic view...” I whispered, my entire field of vision encompassed by the sky.

There were no mountains ahead of us that were taller than the hill on which we stood. It felt tremendous to be able to look down on the mountain range. At the farthest visible point was a dark green horizon and a thin river. This was nature at its most beautiful. If I turned around, I’d see the mountain slope and even taller mountains sprawling out beyond it, but the view looking outward was unbeatable.

This was the view facing the members of the Seatoh Village Chivalric Order as they set up the tents. These were little Van’s special-made basic rest tents, by the way. Since my goal for them was to create fast shade, they weren’t exactly the sturdiest structures, but they were quick and simple to put up. Surprisingly so, in fact.

Whoops. Guess I went and made another great product!

Dee approached me while I was tooting my own horn, a stern look on his face. When he reached me, he turned to look at the campgrounds. “Large monsters

frequent open areas like this. Judging by the scars on the ground, a beast might be resting here during the night. I don't think we should stay for long."

I winced. "Ugh, I thought that might be the case. We could always kill the monster, but we wouldn't be able to bring back its parts. I guess we'll keep this break brief."

Dee folded his arms. "It is true that our Seatoh Chivalric Order can take down a large dragon, but the geography is bad. There are no walls to protect us, and there is no guarantee we will be dealing with only a single monster. In my experience, it is best to avoid fighting monsters in the mountains as much as possible. Facing beasts in a location like this, you often find yourself dealing with unforeseen disadvantages."

He explained all of this in the same tone he used when he was teaching me the ways of the sword. This was his way of trying to impart important knowledge, so I needed to listen closely. "What should we do if we encounter a large monster out of nowhere?"

Dee smirked. "If I am with you, then I will stop the beast myself. If not, please flee immediately. You need to confirm the enemy's numbers, then create a situation in which you can fight them one by one. Never forget: fighting monsters on a road and fighting them in the woods are two very different things."

"Okay, got it." I glanced around. Suddenly I was afraid of a monster ambushing us.

Dee must have noticed this because he smiled broadly. "Ha ha ha! Fear not! My men are keeping an eye on things, and more importantly, I am right here!" He pointed at his chest. This was the posture of a commanding knight who had gained both experience and skill through real combat.

"I'm counting on you, Dee," I said. He boomed another laugh and waved me off.

It was then that Till and Arte approached with tea and snacks. Trailing them

was Khamsin, whose eyes were narrow as he scanned our surroundings.

“I have tea!” announced Till. “Sir Dee, would you like some as well?”

Dee waved a hand at her. “No, I’m fine. A middle-aged man like me would just be getting in the way. I’ll get back to patrolling the area.”

“Oh? I think everyone would love it if you joined them,” Till said, smiling gently.

A shy smile crossed Dee’s face. He turned away. “I appreciate it, but perhaps some other time.”

“All right. I understand.”

With that, Dee was gone. I encouraged Arte and the others to sit down. “C’mon, guys, take a seat and let’s enjoy all of this.” I’d prepared some impromptu wood block benches for us all.

“Thank you very much,” said Arte, taking a seat.

Till was next to her, setting down the tea and a wooden basket filled with cookies and other assorted snacks. I had a bunch of the same treats next to me. When she was done setting everything up for me and Arte, I realized that she and Khamsin were still standing and that they’d moved away from us.

“Why don’t the two of you take a seat?” I asked. But they wouldn’t budge.

“I am fine right where I am,” Till insisted, smiling. “Lord Van, please enjoy your tea before it gets cold.” Next to her, Khamsin nodded seriously.

What were they up to? They hadn’t done this out of consideration for us; I didn’t ask for that. Despite my suspicions, though, I knew that if I tried to confront them, I’d never win against Till.

With resignation in my heart, I looked over at Arte. “They’re kind of distracting, but since we have all these goodies, let’s enjoy ourselves.”

“R-right.”

Feeling a little self-conscious, we faced each other and sipped our tea.

Because we were at such a high altitude, the temperature had dropped significantly, meaning the breeze was chilly. The wind rustled through the trees around us. Combined with the wide blue sky above, it created a wonderful environment for a break.

“The sounds of the wind, the leaves, the birds... It’s like nature is an orchestra playing just for us,” I mused. “Then perhaps the sky is a dance hall of sorts? When you think of it that way, it’s like the birds are dancing.”

I brought the teacup to my lips. The tea’s rich aroma and gentle flavor spread through my mouth. I exhaled, and Arte turned a narrow-eyed gaze on me.

“What’s the matter?” I asked.

Arte looked away, suddenly bashful. “Oh, um... It’s just... You are quite a poet, Lord Van.”

Now that I was not expecting. I hadn’t said anything particularly deep, but I suppose it was a bit poetic for a child of only nine years. Maybe little Van was the best poet in all of Seatoh Village.

An up-and-coming poet had to be humble, so as I reached for a cookie, I said, “It just came to mind, that’s all.” Till was really leveling up her cookie game, because these looked incredible. “Till, thank you for the treats!”

My expectations sky-high, I took a bite of the cookie. Its crunchiness and rich aroma fused with the buttery flavor as it melted in my mouth. It wasn’t super sweet, making it the kind of treat that I could eat endlessly.

“Delicious!”

Till had surpassed my expectations in the best possible way. At this point, she was doing the work of a master. Utterly satisfied, I ate a few more cookies while Till beamed at me.

“Thank goodness. I was worried I might have over-baked them this time around, but I suppose they taste fine?”

Arte finished a cookie and shook her head. “These are delicious. I love the

gentle mouthfeel your cookies usually have, but these crunchy ones are fantastic as well.”

“So tasty!” Khamsin confirmed.

There were crumbs around his mouth and on the ground near his feet. I pointed. “See? This is what happens when you eat and talk at the same time.”

Khamsin snapped to attention, then brought his teacup to his mouth for another sip. “My apologies,” he said afterward, quickly wiping his mouth clean and acting like nothing had happened.

Arte started to laugh at the whole sight.

“Funny, right?” I asked. Arte nodded.

“Yes. But I feel like if I let my guard down, I’ll make just as much of a mess. Till is just so good at baking.”

Till looked at me then, her smile turning a bit troubled. “Yes, well, I have a lord who happens to adore sweets.”

Uneasiness spread through my chest at her words. Lord. She usually called me “Lord Van,” but hearing the word on its own hit differently. Till probably meant nothing of it, but something about being called “lord” by a beautiful girl in a maid uniform made me suddenly want to ask for omelet rice.

I swear, there’s nothing indecent about any of this! I tried frantically to recover for the sake of my own dignity.

“Hey, it’s not just me,” I tried, hoping to distract everyone from my gluttony. “Khamsin eats your sweets like crazy, too. He’s always asking for seconds.”

But Till just giggled. “I know. Truth be told, this is my second time baking these cookies. The first time, Khamsin ate them all!”

“She asked me to taste test them,” Khamsin muttered guiltily.

Arte burst into laughter again, loud and carefree. It was uncommon for her to laugh so loudly, and both Till and Khamsin looked at her. For my part, I’d seen

her like this a few times now, so I watched her warmly as she covered her mouth with one hand and giggled away.

“The two of you can be so funny. And it’s because you’re so close that she can watch you guys and feel comfortable enough to laugh like this,” I explained, guessing what Arte was thinking.

She nodded, still giggling. “E-exactly! I just could not hold back.”

Till and Khamsin watched curiously as Arte took a deep breath and collected herself. This was what peace looked like. I sighed. “Now then, break time is over.”

No sooner had I said those words than I heard trees collapsing in the distance. The ground shook soon after, and the Chivalric Order’s vibe turned intense.

“Don’t tell me...” I whispered, but it was too late. Dee was running toward us, sword and shield in hand.

“Lord Van! Please drop back to the rear!” he yelled. For such a large man, he was incredibly swift as he put himself in front of me diagonally and glared down the hill.

We hadn’t scouted out ahead, and we were flanked by trees on both sides. This meant the only way to retreat was backward. That said, the Seatoh Chivalric Order was here. They wouldn’t be taken down so easily.

“Dee, you don’t need to be a wall for me. Let’s line up the war wagons as a defensive line,” I said. Khamsin ran to deliver this order to the wagon drivers.

Dee nodded without turning back to me. “Thank you. However, it is already here.”

“Huh?”

I whipped around, shocked, as a giant beast smashed through the trees on the mountain slope and made its way toward us.

“The enemy is already in combat mode! Steel your hearts and prepare yourselves!” Dee yelled, slashing his sword downward.

The crack as he sliced the wind itself clashed with the sound of two hard objects colliding, echoing through the open area. That one attack was enough to mow down the nearby trees and put a stop to the massive creature climbing up toward us.

A giant crocodile, to be precise.

“It’s huge! It’s way too big!” I yelled. Wow, these impressions were feeble. *Little Van, you could have picked more sophisticated words.*

But that was just my brain fleeing the reality in front of me. This monster was just too intimidating. It had to be at least twenty meters long from head to tail. Since it crawled on all fours, it had a low posture, but even then, the tip of its nose was at least as tall as Dee. And this very same crocodile had its mouth wide open as it glared at us.

“It’s super big! Its body and mouth are ridiculous!”

More embarrassing assessments spilled out of my mouth, but who could blame me?! This monster could swallow a car whole if it wanted to! Of course I wanted to flee from reality! Anyone would! Little Van wasn’t unique in that regard!

“Graaah!” Ignoring me entirely, Dee slashed sideways at the monster’s mouth. Blood splattered everywhere and the crocodile turned sharply away, setting its inhuman glare on us.

What incredible intensity.

I was behind Dee and it was clearly glaring at him, but somehow I felt like it was glaring at me as well. Dread washed over me. If Dee hadn’t been standing there, I was confident I’d pass out on the spot.

That was when I remembered that Arte and the others were still behind me.

“Khamsin, get the girls to a carriage!”

“Yessir!” Khamsin replied immediately, pulling Arte and Till away.

Meanwhile, our massive intruder bared its fangs, its ferocious gaze darting all over the place in search of its prey. It set its man-sized legs forward in an attempt to restart its climb, but Dee noticed this and swung his sword down, barking orders. “Machine bow squad, you’re on support! All other order members be aware of our surroundings! Protect Lord Van!”



“Yessir!”

The troops moved swiftly. The machine bow squad took up their bows and deployed to the left and right. The other members of the order raised the war wagon shields and prepared the ballistae for firing. Their speedy actions were the result of experience and hard work. Proficiency, even.

“Machine bow squad! Bows up! Be careful not to hit the commander!” Paula yelled, signaling for the squad to point their weapons at the crocodile. “Fire!”

The immense storm of projectiles would be too much for the huge beast to dodge. This battle was as good as over.

Or so I thought. The creature retreated backward with terrifying speed, as if it understood the threat approaching it. The projectiles soared clear over the crocodile while it slid down the hill.

“Curses! Ready your next arrows and make sure to hit it this time!” Paula yelled, her tone and words sharp.

“Yes ma’am!” The machine bow squad took up arms again. Their weapons were capable of consecutive shots, so there was no need to reload. Given how the crocodile had just moved, however, this no longer looked like it would be a simple extermination. If the massive creature came from a direction that Dee couldn’t intercept, it might eat one of the order members whole.

“Dee! Retreat to the rear for now!” I yelled, suddenly overcome with fear.

But Dee smirked. “Ha ha ha! Arb, Lowe! Take Lord Van and retreat!”

Arb and Lowe didn’t hesitate for a moment. “Understood!”

“What about you?!”

Dee turned and smiled at me. “Crocodile meat is delicious. It will be my gift to you!”

I couldn’t hold back the quip that rose to my lips. “I personally prefer beef!”
Wait, is crocodile meat actually good? I thought as Arb and Lowe dragged me to

the rear.

“Lord Van, Lady Arte and Till are both safely in the carriage!” Khamsin shouted as he ran back.

Ironically, now I was the one being evacuated from the battlefield. “L-look, Khamsin’s here! You can stop now!” Arbe and Lowe did as I asked. “The three of you can protect me together, but keep an eye on Dee! If things look bad, we’re going to help him!”

The trio exchanged glances. My orders conflicted with Dee’s, but in the end, they nodded seriously. “Yessir!”

The men (and boy) took up their shields and surrounded me, keeping tabs on Dee. He still stood at the top of the hill with his sword and shield drawn.

Moments later, the backlit crocodile appeared in front of Dee, its mouth open wide in an effort to swallow him whole. This terrifying sight sent a chill down my spine, but Dee calmly moved his shield and sword, intercepting the monster’s mouth. “Nngh!” He kept its upper jaw at bay with his blade and held the lower jaw with his shield. But as strong as Dee was, the crocodile was definitely stronger.

At least, that’s what I thought before Dee managed to lock the beast in place. What terrifying strength!

Everyone watched in stunned silence for a moment until Dee grunted and yelled, “Now’s not the time to be shocked! Everyone, put that crocodile down!”

“R-right!” The rest of the order quickly got moving. The machine bow squad and the ballista operators aimed around Dee.

As soon as I judged that everyone was in place, I issued the command: “Fire!”

More than twenty arrows went flying into the crocodile’s mouth. Every single one of them pierced through to the back of its head.

“Wh-whoa...” Even I was rendered aghast by my own creations’ terrifying power. Needless to say, the man-eating giant crocodile stood no chance against

such an attack. Its eyes rolled over as it collapsed to the side.

“Ha! Incredible arrows, Lord Van!” said Dee, now free of the jaws of the crocodile. He checked the collapsed beast’s eyes and head to confirm the kill. “I did not think we would take the beast down so easily!”

“I’m more impressed that you matched that thing’s strength,” I blurted out. Arb, Lowe, Khamsin, and even Paula and her crew all nodded. Dee’s shoulders started to shake with laughter.

“Ha ha ha! Did I not tell you that I would stop the beast myself? You believe me now, yes?”

He kept cackling. I could only offer him a pained smile in return. “For sure. I know I can count on my super-powerful commander.”

Side Story: Diplomacy

THE SECOND WEEK IN OUR JOURNEY THROUGH THE Wolfsbrook Mountain Range saw us venturing deep into its depths, where we began to see creatures I didn't even know existed. Things like giant dragonflies straight out of ancient Earth. Okay, maybe that was a bit of an exaggeration, but they were still about the size of a small dog.

In any case, they were larger than little Van's tiny face, okay?

One such giant bug flew right in front of me. "Gah!"

There was nothing strange about me crying out in fear. A perfectly normal reaction for a virtuous child such as myself. But Panamera looked at me and cackled. "Afraid of bugs, are we, boy?"

She was just having a laugh, but a wave of embarrassment washed over me. It made me try to act tough. "Huh? No, of course not. Bugs are nothing to me. Psh, I'm not a kid!"

I shrugged bravely and gracefully turned to Panamera...only for a brown spider bigger than my head to materialize right in front of my face.

"Eek!"

It was massive, at least sixty centimeters in size, so there was nothing shameful or strange about me screaming. But Panamera apparently thought it was hilarious. "Ha ha ha!" she laughed, holding her stomach.

Upon closer inspection, the spider was already dead; it had a hole in its stomach from a sword. She must have swiftly killed the creature as it descended from a tree. A remarkable show of skill, but super nasty of her to just leave the corpse there for me to find.

I'd love to know how her mind works, I thought, glaring at Panamera. The

shock of this whole spider incident had put me in a bad mood. *Well, actually, since the human brain is composed of muscles...it's probably just muscles.*

She grinned. "Oh, did I upset you?"

"Not at all," I replied, turning away.

But that just caused Panamera to laugh harder.

"Ha ha ha! You can be so cute! Now, now, don't get angry. I apologize."

Her relaxed tone made me want to toss a snide comment or two her way, but when I turned back around, I was confronted by the stomach of a giant spider. I screamed again.

"Eek!"

Seeing me leap in fear, Panamera laughed as though something inside of her had broken. "Ha ha ha ha ha!" She was a natural-born bully.

"I am so done with you! I'm not selling you weapons or arrows anymore!" I announced.

Panamera patted me on the back, laughing all the while. "Come on, don't be so upset! I would be at a loss without your weapons. I promise to pay extra next time, so please forgive me!"

She was apologizing, but she spoke like someone who was looking down on me. She was literally treating me like a child. If that was how she wanted to play it, I'd just have to use her own words against her. "In that case, from now on you're paying me double!"



“Ha ha ha! That’s a bit much! I’ll settle for a fifty percent increase!”

“Okay, then fifty percent it is. You asked for that, so I’m not letting you go back on your word.”

Hearing how serious I was, Panamera’s eyes widened. “Wait, surely you’re joking? I apologize for teasing you,” she said, slightly panicked.

But there was no way I was letting her off that easy. “Nope. Apology not accepted. Fifty percent increase. Case closed,” I said, drawing a line under it.

Panamera drew her chin inward. “At least make it a ten percent increase. Even the current prices are difficult for me right now, fiscally speaking. If we weren’t in the middle of a war, I would be in the red.”

Panamera’s expression changed as she began to negotiate with me. I burst into laughter and looked up at her. “Fine, I guess I have no choice. I’ll let you go with a ten percent increase.”

Panamera nodded seriously. “I-I am grateful, but...” she began, but then she noticed that something was off. She narrowed her eyes at me, looking skeptical. “Don’t tell me this was your aim all along?”

“Huh? Whatever could you mean?” I replied, trying to play it off.

She sighed. “I take back what I said. You are not the least bit cute. If anything, you are rather annoying.”

“That’s mean.”

“You stole the words right out of my mouth.” Panamera shook her head and frowned. “I swear... You have a lot of nerve manipulating adults at your age in order to make money. You’re going to be an awful man when you get older.”

“As a lord, it is my number one priority to make my territory prosperous. But with that said, I don’t plan to neglect my one and only ally.” I smiled. “I will aid you in any way I can, outside of this little deal. Just ask me, and I shall deliver.”

Panamera shot me an exasperated look, but it faded into a smile. She sighed.

“Right. In that case, I want you to help me acquire my own territory,” she said, starting to chuckle again.

“Are you sure you’re good with something so simple?”

Panamera froze, wide-eyed. Seeing this reaction, I remembered that she was a member of Count Ferdinatto’s faction; there were likely all kinds of covert deals and workings I was not privy to.

Time to backpedal. “I’m just kidding. Having your own territory can be tough, you know.” I was smiling, but Panamera drew close, looking all too serious.

“Boy, do not deceive me. Do you have some sort of plan?”

“Why would I? I’m only nine.”

“That’s what I mean. I have never once thought of you as a nine-year-old.”

“That’s terrible. You make it sound like I’m some old man.”

“Do you not realize that that very response makes you sound old? No, that is not the issue at hand. What do I need to do to acquire my own territory? No matter how many accomplishments I add to my name...”

“J-just calm down!”

We continued to talk things over as we marched through the mountain range. To overhear us, you would never think we were headed to war given the topic we were discussing. Apparently I wasn’t the only one who thought so, either, because rumors began to spread among the other Chivalric Orders that Baron Van was surprisingly courageous.

And they didn’t mean that in terms of my willingness to go to the front lines. They were referring to my ability to forge an advantageous relationship with Viscount Panamera.

Just how terrified of the woman were they?

Side Story:

Surprise

Murcia

MY LIFE HAD BEEN AN ENDLESS STRING OF SURPRISES since my visit to Seatoh Village. The giant wall and huge bathhouse with barracks were certainly stunning, but I was even more shocked by the overall advancement of the village and the happy lives its citizens led.

Looking back, Van, my youngest sibling, was always a mysterious child. I heard that he learned to walk and talk exceptionally early, but what I will never forget are the words he spoke at the dinner table when he was only two years old. Father asked him how he planned to spend the day, and he answered, “There is so much I do not know. First I think I would like to study up on this country.”

It was no wonder that I, Jard, Sesto, and even Father were surprised. Nobody expected a legitimate answer from a two-year-old child; heck, Sesto wasn’t able to answer questions properly until after he turned six. And not only did Van reply, but his answer was also well thought out, the type of response with which Father would be satisfied. But to all appearances Van hadn’t even given it much thought. He seemed to have answered from the heart. I couldn’t believe it.

Making our way to the lake behind Seatoh Village now, my retainers and I encountered something unbelievable.

“Lord Murcia, are they...?”

“I can’t believe it. Apkallu?”

Before us, villagers and people who were half fish enjoyed themselves around the lake. Apkallu were so rare as to be very nearly mythical; of course I was stunned! And here they were, apparently living at the lake as citizens of Seatoh Village. Along the water’s edge stood mysterious buildings, and a host of small

boats floated on the lake.

When Van was, essentially, exiled from his home, I prayed that he could hold out until I had more power available to me. Once I could send him aid of my own free will, I would do everything I could to help him. But within a single year, he had slain a large dragon and successfully protected his territory.

Father laughed when he received the report. “Foolishness!” And frankly, at the time, I felt the same way. It was impossible. No matter how strong Dee was or how good Esparda was at magic, Van simply couldn’t have accomplished such a feat.

Having finally explored Seatoh Village and the adventurers’ town, I understood that the dwarf forge, the blacksmiths, the Mary Chamber of Commerce and the Business Guild, and the top-notch adventurers all contributed to the territory’s progress. But were I in Van’s situation, could I have accomplished the same thing? I knew all too well that the answer was no.

Was it all thanks to Van’s mysterious magic? Until recently, production magic was said to be an ill omen, the epitome of useless magic. But Van’s was different. Or perhaps it was simply that the way he used it was different. Van had been called a genius since he was very young, so maybe that was it: in the end, the magic was useful because Van was at the helm. That was why his territory was so unusually prosperous.

And here I was, walking around in ordinary clothes. How many accomplishments did I have to my name? I was ashamed to admit it, but I was jealous of my little brother. That jealousy mounted as I entered the Wolfsbrook Mountain Range as part of the royal army’s first squad.

The soldiers wore heavy armor and climbed up and down the mountain slopes like beasts. Even on horseback or in a carriage, two hours of travel here was hard on the body; I couldn’t imagine how the infantrymen felt. Was it time for a break? When would the day end?

I heard someone going around asking questions in a hushed tone. I could have easily told the soldiers not to chat during the march, but it wasn't realistic. If people couldn't vent, they would explode.

Under normal circumstances it would be impossible to march through the mountains like this. In the slim chance that it did happen, the march would go through a maintained mountain road. The risk of monster attacks was too high otherwise. Consequently, I hadn't realized just how hard it would be to march along an unserviced mountain road. Our nerves were wearing down with every step through the treacherous landscape. Would we have to do it all over again on the way back?

I marched filled with dread, but the one positive aspect of the journey was that the adventurers accompanying us were way more skilled than I could have anticipated. Thanks to them, monsters were spotted and dispatched long before they could get close to our Chivalric Orders. The adventurers were even killing large beasts. That was unbelievable, but I forced myself to accept reality by convincing myself that they were monster-slaying specialists. After all, large monsters typically required hundreds of members of an order to put down. Strength lay in numbers, of course. But these adventurers were taking the monsters down in groups of ten.

If I didn't know better, I would think they were significantly better at combat than the knights. That wasn't remotely acceptable. The Chivalric Orders were the cornerstone of a territory's defense system, the very things that protected order and stability. If mere wanderers were more capable in combat, it would completely upend public order.

So I told myself they were monster-slaying specialists. It was all I could do.

We progressed through the mountains, battling off dread, panic, and exhaustion. Eventually I heard voices from the Chivalric Order behind me shout, "Lord Murcia!"

"Huh?" I turned around and saw Dee on horseback. He wore a magnificently

decorative set of armor, different from when I last saw him. Was that mithril? Thanks to the dwarf blacksmiths, his armor was on par with the royal guard's.

Dee looked at me and smiled broadly. "Lord Van will be coming shortly!"

"Van? Ah, I heard the adventurers got into a quarrel with some knights. Is that why?"

"That would appear to be the case! But fear not, now that I am here, there is nothing to worry about! I'll just blow everyone away!" He laughed jovially and rode off to the vanguard.

I watched him go and frowned. Did he mean he'd blow away the knights or adventurers? No, not even Dee would do something like that in the middle of a royal march, especially one in which His Majesty was taking part. Still, Dee's words left me feeling a bit uneasy as I waited for the report informing me when Van would arrive.

For some reason, things off in the rear were getting noisy. I turned around, curious, and saw soldiers breaking formation and stepping off to the sides of the road. Usually the people in charge would scold them for this, but it looked like they were the ones telling the soldiers to part ways.

The ground shook then, as if something heavy had fallen. My own horse slowed down nervously, forcing me to pull off to the side and stop. A few moments later, a supremely tough-looking carriage approached, and I noticed Van riding in the coach.

"Brother Murcia!"

"Van! Welcome! Uh, what exactly are you doing?" I asked, seeing Van's people quickly begin to cut down the trees in front of the road.

"We're building a road."

"What? Did His Majesty request this?"

"Nope. I decided to do it."

I was at a loss, but I tried my best to grasp the situation. For some unknown

reason, Van was building a road, and as we conversed, trees were falling all over the place. Van's people then lined the felled trees up as if to block the mountain path itself. What were those axes made of? The trees were snapping in half like branches.

Ignoring my bewilderment, Van smiled and walked over to the timber, placing a hand on a tree's trunk. Within moments, the tree had changed form and become part of a road. While I gaped, speechless, Van pointed at our horses and carriages.

"This'll make travel easier, right? It's a literal pain in the butt to always be shaking all over the place," he said, grimacing before moving forward to continue the process.

"I-I see..."

How much road did he plan to make in a single day? Could he have already built the path stretching from Seatoth Village to here? I watched him work, struck by how crazy his actions were. Later, when our group traversed Van's road, I discovered just how much more comfortable it made the journey. Not only did our speed increase, but the soldiers were also less exhausted.

Van was always a mysterious child, and that hadn't changed. But there was a new impression taking root in me:

Van was a frightening boy.

Side Story: Esparda at Home

THE LIGHT OF THE SUN BEGAN TO SHINE THROUGH the room's window, and the birds outside chirped proactively at one another. It was time to get up and prepare.

I folded my high-quality fur bedding, which would not have been out of place in the royal palace, tidied up, and then opened the closet and pulled out my clothes. My sleepwear was loose, comfortable attire that Lord Van had thought up, but my standard work clothing had not a single wrinkle when I wore it. It fit my body precisely.

Since coming to Seatoh Village, my living situation had improved considerably. The constant sense of urgency was gone, replaced by new things happening daily. We were constantly in the process of changing and developing both the village and town, which was certainly part of it, but the biggest element was how quickly both places were developing.

When new residents arrived, they required lodging and daily necessities, and if we did not have enough work for them, we had to make adjustments. The people of Seatoh Village foresaw this and made the necessary preparations as the village was expanded, so there was minimal chaos. But even then, the population was increasing at an unanticipated speed.

I thought we still had time to deal with this, but it looks like I will have to speed up the plan.

I cast my gaze out the window. Reflected in it was an old butler. Somehow, without noticing, I had reached the verge of turning sixty. I did not know how many years I had left in this world, but I knew I had to aid Lord Van however I could while I was still able.

Lord Van absorbed knowledge at a shocking rate and even knew things of

which I had no awareness. He was also able to put that knowledge to practical use. Child prodigy. These words were whispered in the marquis' house, but I believed them to be true. It was certainly true that nobody like Lord Van existed among the people I knew. But babies who learned how to walk quickly stumbled just as often.

Lord Van quickly absorbed all sorts of information and put it to practical use in his territory. As a lord, his ability to take initiative recommended him, as did the kindness and warmth he showed his citizens. However, he ignored the way the kingdom worked, its culture, and its rules for how nobility should act. For a normal person, it was reasonable to think that all that mattered was whether a way of doing things produced positive results, but this approach ignored the needless friction it could create.

Lord Van was young, so it made sense that he did not lend much thought to such annoyances. Of course, if I mentioned it to him, he would undoubtedly understand, and he would be considerate of my opinions on the matter. However, should something happen to me, he might lack such consideration for noblemen and noblewomen who stuck rigidly to conventions and history of the land.

As an older man, it was my responsibility to pass my experience on to the younger generation. I still had much to teach him. *First, I must keep a careful eye on the town and village while he is gone.*

My thoughts were interrupted by a knock at the door and the voice of a woman speaking from beyond it. "Good morning, Lord Esparda. We have visitors..."

"Good morning. Please wait a moment."

I double-checked that my attire was in order. There were no problems, so I opened the door and exited into the hall. One of the maids who worked here at the manor was waiting for me. She was a former noble who had been sold into slavery. Despite her terrible misfortune, she had grown much happier since

coming to Seatoh Village.

The current head maid, Till, was a cheerful girl, but she lacked discretion at times, and she frequently broke furnishings and daily necessities. Till also made mistakes managing food, sometimes even forgetting to make orders. Nonetheless, the maids respected her a great deal. I warned her many times not to cause trouble for Lord Van, but she showed no signs of improving.

Till was a handful. Still, it was thanks to her that the other maids had their acts together.

“Who are these visitors?” I asked.

“They’re representatives for a group of people who wish to move from Marquis Fertio’s territory to Seatoh Village. It seemed urgent, as they were the victims of bandits. I currently have them waiting in the village square under the supervision of the Seatoh Village Chivalric Order.”

“Understood. They must have traveled a long way, so please prepare food and drinks for them. However, we still do not know if they have any ulterior motives, so please do not offer them sustenance until after we have confirmed they are not dangerous.”

“I understand.” Her face tightened. She was born into nobility; she likely caught my implication.

It was common for spies from all sorts of places to present themselves before noblemen and noblewomen who were on the rise. They could hail from neighboring territories, the royal family, or sometimes even other countries, and they could also infiltrate as merchants, adventurers, or mercenaries. To prevent such a thing from occurring, we had to ask all newcomers where they came from and why. Right now, since Lord Van was a new baron, both he and Seatoh Village were receiving a great deal of attention.

I narrowed my eyes and looked down at the maid. “Shall we? This is an excellent opportunity for you to observe how to process and question immigration candidates.”

The girl nodded studiously. “Y-yessir!”

The corner of my lips rose into a smile at her earnest response. We got moving, marching toward the village square. In my work as a butler, I could not afford to let any problems arise here in the village. On my pride, I would not let outsiders from another nation, royalty, or noble family worm their way into this village.

In the village square I found a few dozen men and women, all clad in tattered clothes and looking awfully thin. Their feet were covered in dirt, their eyes sunken. The oldest looked to be in their fifties and the youngest in their thirties. They looked miserable, and I could see that even the knights watching them with their swords drawn were not sure how to handle the situation. Many in the order had once lived under similar conditions; I was certain they wanted to feed them as soon as possible.

We had to do this the right way, however. Anyone who was on the verge of death would receive treatment first, but for now, they were all looking at me and waiting in silence. *In that case, I should proceed with the questioning.*

“Is this everyone?”

One of the members of the order turned to me. “Sir! We have the rest of them waiting outside the wall. Approximately two hundred individuals!”

I looked back at the men and women in front of me. It was possible that among the larger group were individuals paid to acquire information on Seatoh Village, but the dozens before me just then did not appear to be spies.

“Then I will ask you all a few simple questions. Please answer truthfully,” I said. Then I questioned each of them individually.

“I understand.”

The process took time because I was screening them one by one. Spies often panicked in these scenarios because there was no way for them to know how

others answered their questions. Nobody I questioned showed any such panic; they acted naturally.

Someone who had gone through significant training might have been able to act their way through the interview, but I sensed no such ulterior motives among the people I interviewed. I checked with each of them, and they confirmed everyone seeking entrance to Seatoh Village was a known face, even those outside. In other words, everybody was from the same village. If that was the case, any spies would stand out immediately.

All we had to do now was prevent them from leaving the village for the first few months. If any of these villagers were hired to spy on us, they would begin to panic if they couldn't move freely. We would be able to draw out any spies without actually investigating each person.

"Now then, I would like to formally issue licenses to you all to move here. We have paperwork to do, so please bring the people waiting outside. Once we confirm that everyone is present, we will offer food and drink. Is that understood?"

The dozens of villagers before me nodded seriously, stood up, and then ran out the front gates. Not long thereafter, more than two hundred individuals gathered in the village square, surrounded by the Chivalric Order. Everyone looked exhausted, in no condition to be scheming.

First, we needed to feed them. "I am sure some of them have not eaten in quite some time," I said to some residents of Seatoh Village. "Please offer them soup and soft bread, food that won't hurt their stomachs. Also make sure to tell them to drink their water slowly."

The villagers assisting me nodded and began to move. Almost everyone who lived here came from somewhere else initially, so they understood well both the sadness that came from leaving the place you were born and the physical toll of moving from one place to another. This sympathy and consideration led to the weary travelers looking less concerned and more relieved as they ate.

Among them were many middle-aged men who, perhaps finally allowing relief to wash over them, began to cry. Some of the Seatoh Village residents and even order members cried in sympathy as well.

“You can take your time, okay? You’re safe now.”

“Hey now, stop crying. C’mon, have some water and feel better.”

“Are you all okay? If anyone needs medical treatment, please let me know. We’ll fix you right up.”

The villagers showered the travelers with their kindness, and people of all ages continued to cry. Even I found myself ready to let my guard down, but I knew I had to harden my heart. It was precisely because of how much they had suffered that the residents of Seatoh Village were so kind and gentle. However, from another angle, you could also say that made them easy to fool. If someone with ill intentions infiltrated our village, they could easily bring it to its knees. This would enable them to steal not only valuable ore, monster hides, claws, and other resources, but also our important weapons, like the ballistae and machine bows.

If a resident of Seatoh Village ever lost their life due to one of the weapons he made, Lord Van would be devastated. I needed to stay sharp so that never happened.

I was Baron Van Nei Fertio’s head butler, after all.

Afterword

THANK YOU SO MUCH FOR PURCHASING THIS VOLUME. It's me, Sou Akaike. Volume four is finally out! As far as I'm concerned, this is a tremendous achievement—maybe even the greatest of all miracles. That's no overstatement.

This miracle was only possible thanks to Kururi's spectacular illustrations and H's hard work, as well as Overlap's efforts. And of course, I have all of you to thank for this as well.

I said this in a previous postscript, but this work was born from my love of tower defense games. The village has grown stronger, more people live there now, and now little Van's home is starting to draw attention from other nobles. He is becoming a bigger presence in his own right as well. Unfortunately, the nation's nobility is starting to try to get in his way. Instead of launching a full-frontal attack, many are plotting against him behind the scenes. How will Van thwart their nefarious schemes? Personally, I can see a future in which he just forces his way right through them, but is that how things will actually go?

If you're willing to keep supporting this story, I would be thrilled if you grabbed the next volume upon its release. And of course, I would also recommend that those who have yet to purchase these books start with volume one. I would literally jump for joy, in fact! Additionally, I recommend grabbing volume three of the manga adaptation. I guarantee that Maro Aoירו's lively, expressive artwork will fill you with awe.

Now then, let me express my gratitude to everyone once more. H, who always listened to my concerns and whipped my compositions into shape. Oraidō and their proofreading. Kururi's beautiful illustrations. And of course, you, who picked up this book.

Thank you. Thank you so much.

—SOU AKAIKE



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